WELCOME TO
DANGANMALL
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# WELCOME TO
# DANGANMALL

A Danganronpa 80`s Mall Zine

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STUFFING

You'll never
leave!
Love-Love Candy!
Sale! Sale! Sale!
Kuma Canes
Sale! 50% off!!
Welcome to
HH
C.N
NK
I.h
Kokichi was here!

# The Haunting of Dangan-Arcade

**by Vi (mez0_vision)**

"This one looks like the easiest to cheese, right?" Akane leaned up against the machine, pressing her nose the the glass to stare at the game inside.

Huffing, Chihiro crouched to look at the plugs at the bottom of the machine. A small USB was in their hand, but every time they tried to put it in the plug they got too nervous. "We should try your way first."

It was just the two of them now trying to win the huge plush bear strung up at the prize corner. Their other companions, Nekomaru and Mondo, had left them to participate in a competition of strength.

"Alright!" She held up an arm, flexing her bicep, then inserted a token into the slot. "Time to win some tickets!" Biting her lip, she gripped the giant lever of the machine and pushed. The jackpot flew by as the wheel inside spun, and Akane heaved the lever up and down again, over and over. In protest, the machine tried to stop the lever in place, but she continued anyway. Chihiro stared on with wide eyes.

"Umm, Owari?" they tugged on the cuff of her sleeve, but Akane's concentration remained unbroken. "Owari! How is this going to get us more tickets?" Their hand then wrapped around her muscled bicep, and their companion finally turned, arms stilling.

"The power of persuasion, Fujisaki! After brutalizing the machine, it will have no option than to reward me the jackpot!" Pride washed over her face, and the wheel of the machine spun rapidly, the numbers blurring. With their head tilted to the side, Chihiro went closer to the machine, looking for the shiny jackpot part of the wheel. "Wait for it," Akane said, one hand on the glass.

When the wheel finally stopped, the arrow on the side only narrowly missed the small line that led to 1,000 tickets.

"You're kidding me!" She kicked the machine weakly with the tip of her shoe. "That's gotta be rigged! Let me try one more time, yeah?" Another token disappeared into the machine, and the lever angrily pumped up and down. Before she could rip the lever clean off the game, Chihiro returned to the back of the machine and plugged the little USB in. They had coded it to make the machine give out all its tickets, but it would have to take a moment to load.

As Akane bit her lip and waited for the wheel to stop spinning and land on the jackpot, a hand clapped onto her shoulder. "Ahh!" she spun away, putting her hands up into fists in front of her. In front of her was her friend Leon, decked in dark high waisted jeans, a baggy polo shirt with colorful squiggles and swirls, and a nametag. "Oh, it's just you." Her eyes flickered over to the machine, where the wheel was still racing around its center. "You...work here?"

"Yup." He looked over at the machine, hands slipping into his pockets and pulling out a lollipop. The wrapper was swiftly discarded to the floor. "That thing is really going, Akane!"

"Leon?" Chihiro peeked out from the side of the machine. "Why would you work here? I thought you wanted to work at the karaoke place?"

"Yeah, well," he shrugged, "I thought I might have a better chance of meeting some cute girls here, you know? Anyway, what are you doing?"

"Winning." Akane answered, looking back to where the wheel was slowing down, halting right before the jackpot. She kicked the machine, and the machine spit out a couple more tickets than the five it had landed on. Kicking it again, it gave out a few more. She continued to kick it, with Leon eventually joining and whooping victoriously as the strips of tickets folded up at their feet. Success, shaped into rectangular stubs of neon yellow paper, piled up around them.

"Excuse me!? What is the ruckus going on over here? This is not proper arcade etiquette!" A stern voice interrupted their celebration of their new wealth, and they all turned to see a face dominated by two furrowing eyebrows. Leon stiffened, hands slipping into pockets. It was Taka, scowling at them in a bright pink polo shirt, name tag securely clipped over his heart. Spotting the punk among the tickets, his expression managed to turn even more incredulous. "Kuwata! There you are! Don't tell my you were encouraging this...foolery!"

"Kiyot-" Chihiro tried, but Leon slid in front of the pair of friends, ease returning to his posture.

"Relax! Nothing nefarious was going on here."

He rolled his eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, you and Owari were kicking the machine!"

Leon mirrored the eye roll, shrugging, "We were trying to get...the uh...how do I break this to you..." he turned his head to briefly glance at the two people behind them, who looked equally confused. He winked, his tone turning serious. "There's a ghost in that machine, Ishimaru."

His posture, which was already impossibly stiff and straight, managed to flinch tighter. "A ghost!"

"Definitely! We were just trying to get it out."

He nodded, looking at the machine, which was still giving out tickets. Its lights flickered, and Chihiro gave it a light hearted kick from where their leg was concealed behind the side. It rattled, and Taka nodded more forcefully. "I've got it! An exorcism!"

"Uh, I think we got it." Leon tried, knowing an exorcism would lead to more work and less time seeing what chicks he could try his luck with.

"Clearly you did not," he sighed, exasperated, looking to the other two to explain. "Leon is new here, I've been the one showing him how to put his...limited skills to work. I apologize for his inexperience. We have to do a proper exorcism."

"We got it!" he insisted.

"I just saw the machine move of its own accord. We need to turn to an expert."

"And who would that be?" He gave him a second to respond, and pounced at the first syllable trying to leave his mouth. "It certainly couldn't be you, Mr. Smarty Pants."

One of Taka's eyes twitched with irritation. "I was going to say that I didn't know who."

"Hey, isn't there a psychic at this mall? Next to the fro-yo place?" Akane broke up what was soon to develop into endless bickering. "I pass it like, everytime we come here. There's all those neon signs and that palm reading poster? Anyone else know the place?"

"Yeah! I remember passing by there." Fujisaki said, looking at her gratefully. In the limited times they had seen the two boys interact, it had always devolved into them uselessly butting heads.

Leon turned his back to his co-worker, crossing his arms and smirking. "I was just about to say-"

"Great! We can get some fro-yo and then get the psychic to help us out with this!" Pumping a fist in the air, Akane then plucked the last ticket from the machine and gathered the pile into her arms. "Where can I store these tickets in the meantime? Wouldn't want to lose all our winnings!"

Past a beaded curtain that jingled as they walked by, and the bright signs advertising palm readings and fortune tellings, they found the mall's clairvoyant, who was bent over his crystal ball, tongue peeking from the corner of his lips in concentration.

Taka was the first one to speak. "Yasuhiro! Hello! We need your help!"

The round table the man was sitting at bumped upward as his knee hit it in surprise, and the crystal ball bounced and rolled towards the edge. "Agh! Noooo!" Clambering to catch it, he scurried across the table.

"Don't worry, I got it!" Akane grinned, her quick instincts saving the ball before it could shatter into a million sad fragments.

Clapping his hands above his head in thanks, Yasuhiro sighed. "Thank you so much! What a miracle!" When he went to take it back, it was held up farther away from him, balancing precariously on Akane's palm. He blinked. "Huh?"

"We need your help with something." she said.

"With what?"

"We have a ghost problem."

Immediately, he scrambled back as far as he could, a petrified look twisting his face. "A ghost!? Monta & Brothers, please protect me from this negative energy!"

"We need your help." Akane repeated, rolling the crystal ball up her arm to her shoulder, then back down. It was quite impressive, but the trick didn't distract Hiro from his fear for very long. "So...either you help us with the ghost or I get to keep this sick ball."

After a long moment of him staring at her, he finally cracked to the pressure and nodded. "Fine, fine, I'll try my best but my forte isn't with ghosts, or the occult."

---

"Are you sure this is how an exorcism works?" Chihiro asked, tucking their skirt underneath their legs as they sat down, completing the semi-circle around the machine. Sprawled on the rug was a ouija board and some small electric candles (Taka had insisted that they couldn't use real flames in the arcade). Because of the supposed haunting, Taka was able to scare all the customers out and put a sign on the door that said they were temporarily closed. "In all the movies I've seen it looked a little more professional than this."

Hiro's eyebrow twitched. "Just be grateful I was willing to come here with you."

"Well? Let's get it going!" Akane cheered, the ball placed on her lap as she sat criss-cross next to Leon and Taka.

"Alright, the first step is to greet the spirit." With a couple deep breaths, he reached for the planchette, anad the others did the same, leaning so their fingers were crammed on the wooden piece. Hiro was shaking, his voice tremulous. "Uh, hello ghost? Er, are there any spirits in this room?" There was a moment of silence as the question hung in the air, each of them waiting anxiously for the planchette to move. And then, it did. It pushed forward, up towards the yes. "Agh! Who moved it!? One of you just moved it, right!?" He turned an accusatory glare at Leon, "It was you, wasn't it! That's not even funny, dude!"

"It wasn't me!" Kuwata defended, nearly lifting his fingers from where they whitened on the wood.

The planchette continued to move, nearly making it to yes before swerving to no.

"That doesn't even make any sense!" Taka shook his head, "Who would be answering if there were no spirits!?" The planchette moved back to yes, and stayed put. "Phew!"

Hiro went on to the next question. "How many spirits are there?"

1.

"Are you in the arcade machine?"

Little by little, it moved back to yes.

Hiro whimpered, and used his free hand to cover his face, one eye peeking out from between his fingers. "Can you...leave?" The planchette stayed stagnant over yes.

Akane rolled her eyes at Hiro's cowardice. "Does this mean the spirit stopped talking to us or that the answer is yes?" He just shrugged. "Well that's super helpful."

Leon jumped in, "Ghost, spell 'I CUP'."

I. C. U. P.

"Get back on topic!" Taka scolded, leading Leon and Akane to laugh more. "Don't you want this to be over with?"

"Not really, this ghost is kinda funny. What else do you think it could do? Other than use this board." Leon used his free hand to tap at the piercing at his chin. "Hmmm...could you knock something over?"

"Don't provoke it!" Hiro whined, then gulped dramatically as they all waited for something to be mystically shoved over. After a few seconds, they all released their breath, everything had stayed still. Until, something started to rattle, like a fist beating against something. The rattling continued, and everyone looked around to see what was being hit. "That could just be one of the games, right? You didn't power all of them off did you?"

Taka shook his head.

"Leon?"

"Nope," The answer was an attempt at being nonchalant, but his voice wavered. "Haha, well, it could just be something outside the mall, you know? There are plenty of other stores open, and people are still shopping and all. I'm not convinced it was the ghost."

"Then provoke it again," Akane suggested, smiling as he shriveled away at her words. "What if the ghost turns on a light instead? Since all of the main ones are off." She craned her head to look at the ceiling, and sure enough, light started to flood in past rows of arcade machines. It filtered past the LEDs and through the wires, the neon shapes on the rug illuminating. "Which light is that?"

"How did it do that?" Leon whispered, his hand absent from the board and now clutched tightly at his chest.

Hiro added, joining in on the whispering, "It was a light from the heavens!"

"This seems to be a powerful ghost..." Chihiro said, moving the planchette towards the goodbye, but was faced with the resistance of the others pressing down on it. "Please leave us alone! We didn't mean any harm! Good-"

"This hurts so bad." The voice that suddenly spoke was not any of theirs, was deep, hoarse, and breathless, scratching through the air into their ears.

Before it could speak again, Hiro let out a piercing wail, which managed to be even worse sounding than the voice of the ghost.

"What the hell was that?" The ghost's voice was louder, drawing nearer to the group. Akane tensed, her hands moving into fists. In a moment, she had sprung up from her spot, the crystal ball discarded as she leapt forward, agile as a cat. Her fist pounded towards the voice, hitting a hard, warm surface that felt...human. "God damn it! What was that for!" She struck again, blowing the ghost-or whatever it was-backwards into one of the machines.

"Take that!" she grinned, but as her eyes focused on the form near the machine, she made out an all too familiar pompadour. "Oowada!?"

"Yeah! It's me, idiot!" He struggled to get himself up, and Akane sheepishly offered an arm to help him. When he took it, his hold was unusually weak.

"Mondo!" It was Chihiro who next rushed over to him, frowning at the bruise on his arm. "Did Akane manage to do this to you?"

Another voice spoke up, this time being recognizable as Nekomaru's, "Nah, it was just me! I had a good day today and managed to land a few hits at the strength competition!"

"I was just going easy on you." Mondo gritted out, glaring at his friend, who didn't look beat up at all compared to him. Some strands of the biker's blond hair had fallen from the usual hairstyle, and compared to the condition

the rest of him was in, it just further proved the strength of the hair sprays and gels.

All of the lights of the arcade then flickered on, illuminating the mess of faux candles, the crystal ball and the board on the ground, along with a shaking Hiro.

"Now what happened here!? We thought it was weird that the arcade was all dark but thought we could come in anyway just to check if you were still here..."

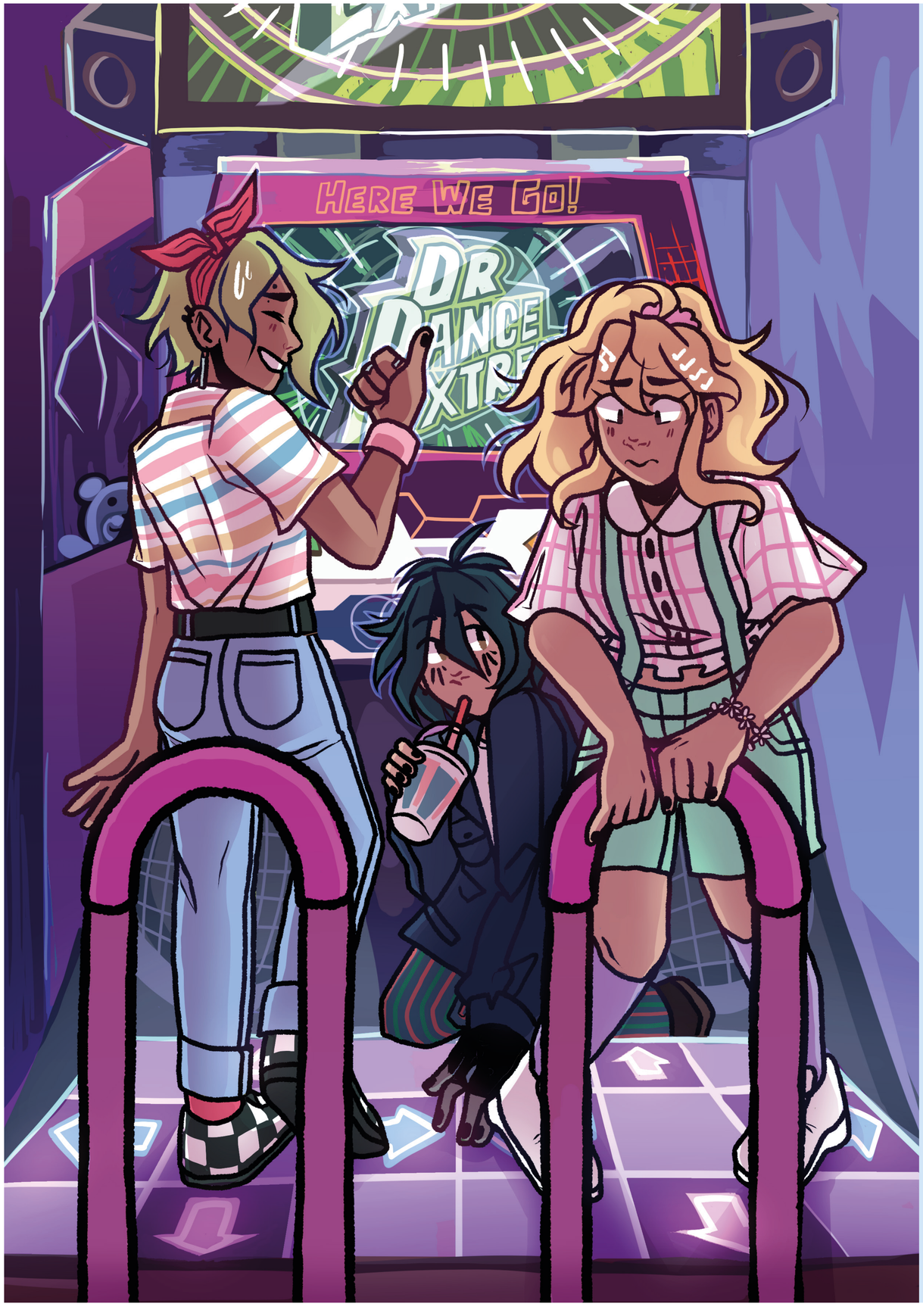
"So that's what the rattling and the light was from..." Chihiro sighed, relieved, turning back to look at the rest of their friends, who still appeared shaken up. Leon was biting on the pad of his thumb, his cheeks flush with embarrassment at being so scared. Taka was mechanically going through the motions of resetting the arcade to normal, but stumbled a little over his own feet.

Mondo took in the sight. "Huh?"

"Oh, we were just having an exorcism." They shrugged nonchalantly, then hooked their arm around Akane's. "Let's go get our prize now! We earned it."

"For sure! We'll probably even have some tickets left over!"

When the mass of tickets was revealed at the prize counter, Leon struggling to unhook the bear from its place at the wall while Taka counted each stub, both boys sighed. "We left for one moment... "


HERE WE GO!

THE BITE
PEOPLE AREN'T THE ONLY ONES HUNGRY
"THE BITE OF 86'"
- É Witness
Killer Animatronics Reported at Local mall. Customers especially kids and short people are advise to not go near the animatronics.

Roller
SPACE

# Club “After-Hours”

**by Cam (Preppycat)**

Ideally, Fukawa Toko wouldn’t be starting her evening laying inside a water fountain, yet here she is doing just that.

The manner in which it happened was all too silly as well. She had simply come to the mall hoping to find a nice outfit to wear to her friend’s birthday party (she’s overheard how people have whispered about her appearance before) but got sleepy halfway through. She had ended up sitting on the edge of the fountain for a minute but ended up drifting off.

At some point, her position must’ve shifted too much, and she ended up toppling backwards into the water, waking her up.

She groans, sitting up and brushing some soaked strands of sangria-coloured hair out of her line of sight before truly taking in her surroundings.

All of the lights are off, the only source of actual light coming from the windows right below the ceiling, moonlight illuminating the floors. All of the stores are dark as well; half of them have shut and locked doors. One last thing that she can’t help but notice is that there isn’t one other person around, or at least in this area.

Is the mall...closed?

Why didn’t anyone wake her? Even just a guard to tell her to ‘beat it.’ Was she really that invisible?

Fukawa stands, stepping out of the fountain with the utmost care so as to not slip. She wrings out the bottom of her royal-blue off-the-shoulder shirt and starts making her way toward the front doors.

Here is her working theory.

Frequently since her youth, Fukawa Toko has had a natural knack for being unnoticed. Sometimes (more often than not, really), without even trying. Of course, it would make sense if no one saw that she was still here as the mall was closed.

She sighs.

Left behind once more...But apparently not the only one.

...Huh?

Gathered in a small group by the door are four other teenagers about her age.

The first is a blonde wearing an elbow-length-sleeved white blouse with a matching skirt that reaches down to just below her knees. The second is a tough-looking guy with fiery-red hair, wearing a black and blue knit sweater and jeans. The third is a goth-looking boy wearing a black turtleneck and pants, and the last is a boy with raven hair, wearing a green button-up over jeans and under a dark-blue jacket.

“Ah! What are the odds that five people get locked in the mall overnight?!” The blonde exclaims.

“You’re soaking wet.” The ravenet murmurs.

The tough-looking guy scoffs at the other female. “You said the same thing when it was just four people.”

“It was still crazy then!”

Fukawa raises an eyebrow. “Huh? Y-You all are still here too?” She tries to look past them, “Are all of the doors locked? I-Is there no guard to let us out?”

“They are strong locks,” The darkly-dress boy says softly before drastically raising his voice, “They must have some sort of dangerous ENCHANTMENT ON THEM AS I’M NO MATCH FOR-”

“Oh, put a sock in it, Tanaka.”

Tanaka deflates at the same time as Fukawa.

“So we’re all locked in here then?”

The blonde offers her a sad smile.

“For the time being, that appears to be the case. But don’t worry! Spending all of the time close together, the time will surely fly!”

Great.

---

Fukawa stands to the side, glaring at the scene in front of her.

The blonde, Sonia, is perched on the edge of the fountain ledge, frowning at something the tough-looking guy, Kuwata Leon, is saying to her.

The ravenet, Saihara Shuichi, comes up to her with a small smile, offering her a towel he grabbed from an unlocked store to help warm up her still-drenched form. Fukawa practically snatches it out of his hands, draping it around her shoulders.

Meanwhile, Tanaka anxiously paces off to the side, seemingly lost in thought.

Are these really the people she’s going to be stuck with for hours more still? How in the hell is she going to survive this?! I mean, they’re all so weird and questionable! She’ll simply die before she can be rescued!

She rises to her feet, taking a couple of steps away from the group, biting her lower lip.

“Well,” Kuwata declares rather loudly, “As long as we are all trapped here, we might as well have some fun, right?”

Tanaka’s eyes narrow. “Fun? How on Earth are we supposed to have fun here? We are imprisoned and surely awaiting trouble upon our discovery!”

“Well, I do not get how exactly we would get in trouble if all of the circumstances of our imprisonment are accidental,” Sonia volunteers, examining her nails, “I, for instance, spilled soda pop all over my outfit and by the time I emerged from the bathroom all dry and clean, everyone had gone home!” She declares casually before amending, “Well, almost everyone...heh.”

“I was dared,” Kuwata admits sheepishly, “Money was wagered. I may get in a lot of trouble come the morning, but after that, I’ll be rich! No one believed I would be able to pull this off, yet here I am!”

Fukawa wrinkles her nose in disgust.

“What about you, Saihara?”

“Oh, I, uh...it’s really not important.”

“Tanaka?”

“It is none of your business, you fiend.”

The sangria-haired girl huffs, curling in on herself as she turns away from the group. If meaningless conversation such as this keeps up, none of them are going to get anywhere or accomplish anything.

A quick scan around the area confirms that everyone else seems to be thinking along the same lines, or at least that’s what their faces seem to be saying. They’re bored, stressed, and stuck like sitting ducks. The sudden silence in the half-darkened mall has just become deafening.

Five different people from all different walks of life just...awkwardly staring at each other.

Fabulous.

Kuwata is the one who cracks first.

He whirls around, loudly clapping his hands once. “Well, even if we are stuck here all night, this sure is no way to spend the time.”

“He is right,” Sonia agrees readily, “We should seek out a place to sleep immediately.”

The fiery-haired boy rolls his eyes. “No, I meant we should do something fun to pass the time! We’re all in an empty mall by ourselves for who knows how long; let’s make the most of it!”

Fukawa’s eyes narrow, hugging herself tighter. What an idiot. All of these people; are idiots, and they should know.

“You’re all idiots.” She voices out loud, matter-of-factly.

Kuwata glares down at her. “You know, you’re proving to be very annoying,” He grumbles, “Well, everyone else, let’s do something fun, huh? No point just sitting here!”

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea,” Saihara pipes up, “What if we damage something? We’re going to be in enough trouble in the morning as it is.”

Even if it’s not for the right reason, at least this guy is being reasonable.

“It is best just to stay put and recharge to greet the dawn anew,” Tanaka mutters in his dark, mysterious voice, “Seeing as we were quick to give up on escape.”

Kuwata turns his last hope on the blonde, looking down at her with pleading eyes. “Well, princess? What do you say? You’re just going to sit like a duck until the morning comes, huh?”

Sonia lightly strokes her chin. “I am not sure, guys...He may have a point here.”

Fukawa buries her head in her hands. Kuwata grins really wide.

“Well, then step right this way, m’lady!”

Saihara leaps to his feet. “W-Wait! I’ll come with you guys, J-Just to make sure you guys don’t do any actual

damage."

"Well, if everyone is going..." Tanaka grumbles.

Four sets of expectant eyes turn on Fukawa. She lets out a rather loud groan.

---

Somehow, Tanaka stumbled into an unlocked cleaning room.

They mixed soap and water before spreading it all along the food court floor. Kuwata then instructed everyone to remove their shoes, leaving them all in nothing but just their socks. When asked what the point of all of this was, he let out a whoop as he takes a running start, sliding across the floor.

The sangria-haired girl turns away from the site as the other three excitedly join him, sliding around the floor as if it was some sort of ice rink.

She refuses to have fun while trapped here with these losers. Not that doing something like this would be fun anyway.

Luckily, Saihara notices her standing off to the side and glides over to her. "Hey," He mutters, "You not interested in this activity? I'm sure Kuwata-kun has something planned for after this but do you want to, I don't know, take a walk while we wait?"

She raises her eyebrows at the offer.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. After all, he seemed to be the least cringe-worthy out of the four of them. Well, so far, at least.

"S-Sure," She mumbles, "Whatever."

His eyes brighten at her unexpected acceptance, and he hurries to put his shoes back on. Once he does, he smiles at her, leading her away from the food court and deeper into the mall, leaving the other three behind.

"You don't seem as thrilled as everyone else to be trapped in the mall overnight," He observes and then laughs softly, "I suppose from what I know of you so far, you'd tell me that's obvious."

"Yeah..."

"Just, um...Is there anything I can do to make this unfortunate situation more bearable? More...fun, even?"

Fukawa raises an eyebrow at his words. This Saihara guy seems to be adamant about getting through to her, huh? With his being all nice to her and offering her a towel and all.

"I just want to go home," She huffs, "I hate being out. I hate being forgotten; I hate being invisible."

"I'm sorry you feel that way often," His tone is genuine, "That doesn't sound very fair. If you want, we can be friends and hang out after this whole fiasco is over."

The girl bites her tongue and refrains from responding, not wanting to say anything too mean at the moment.

"Hey, you never mentioned how you got trapped in here in the first place. What happened?"

She scoffs. "I guess I blended into the background again. I was sitting on the fountain's edge, and I fell asleep. I-Isn't that pathetic?"

"Not pathetic. It's not fair to you. You sound like you deserve so much better, Fukawa-san. No-I'm sure you do...I take it awful stuff like that happens to you all of the time?"

A nod.

"Man, I'm so sorry..."

"I-It's whatever. I mean, I'm used to it...I'm done with this conversation now."

He dips his head. "Of course. Should we go make sure the rest of the group is still staying out of trouble, then?"

"Whatever."

---

"Truth or dare?" Kuwata is asking Sonia with a leer when the two of them finally make their way back to the group.

"This game is sure full of a lot of pressure," The blonde chuckles nervously, "I suppose I will go with 'truth,' though."

The fiery-haired boy's malicious smirk deepens. "How many-"

"I-I'm going to stop you right there," Fukawa interrupts harshly, "Judging by the look on your f-face, you're about to say something perverted, a-and I don't feel like having to punch someone this late at night."

Kuwata glowers at the pair as Saihara nods in agreement. The ravenet sinks to the ground, Fukawa delicately settling down next to him.

Tanaka lets out a yawn, leaning his head against the wall.

"So anyways, we were just playing a couple of rounds of 'Truth or Dare.' It really seemed like the safer option after Tanaka-san slipped and hit his head. Fortunately, it does not appear to be a concussion." Sonia explains.

Saihara smiles slightly.

"Sounds lovely," He turns his head to look at Fukawa, "Truth or-"

Fukawa's harsh glare stops the question in its tracks.

---

At some point in the night, as they were sitting around talking, one by one, they drifted off. When their eyes open once again, instead of the only source of light being the moon, the sun is gently shining through the window.

Fukawa flushes, realizing that her head has fallen on Saihara's shoulder during the night, and she's quick to scramble away from him.

Just across from them, Sonia and Tanaka had also accidentally cuddled up during the night and are now working on untangling themselves from each other. And Kuwata, bless his heart, was still cuddled up to a broom.

The sangria-haired girl huffs, rising to her feet and checking the time. People will be coming to open the mall any minute. They all need to start getting ready to explain themselves and then hopefully go home.

Just as she starts shuffling off towards the main doors, she hears a voice call, "Wait!"

Saihara is now standing directly behind her. She's quick to frown at him and then raise an eyebrow.

"W-What? It's time to part ways; you know that."

"I meant what I said, about wanting to keep in touch with you, to be friends with you," He insists earnestly, "I want to get to know you more. You seem like a really sweet, interesting person, Fukawa-san. Your exterior, to be brutally honest, is a little tough to crack, but I know in my heart it's worth it."

Fukawa is silent for what must be a long time.

"S-Stop teasing me."

"I'm not teasing you! Sonia and Tanaka are continuing a friendship as well! Give me a chance, will you? Please?"

His sincerity and kindness is starting to make Fukawa feel sick. Best to shut him up now by conceding to his wishes.

"F-Fine. Grab me that napkin, and I'll write down my home number or something."

Saihara is like an eager, excited little puppy.

Once Fukawa gives him her number (her actual number, surprisingly), he offers to walk her to the door, to which she reluctantly accepts. Of course, they don't end up getting ready to walk to the door alone, as the other three are ready to go as well, also exchanging numbers and murmuring "goodbyes" and "see you soons."

All in all, he's probably not a bad guy. They all seem like they're decent people. Not perfect, of course, but no one is. And surely, if her one friend were here, she'd tell her to keep all of these potential friends.

Maybe she'll try. Maybe it won't be so bad.

And maybe she did get something good out of this unfortunate situation after all.

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# Smoldering Shades

**by Rose (KibaSniper)**

"Let me remind you that we are not in this dungeon for frivolities. Our quest is noble, of which knights would endure for the sake of glory. Think of it like seeking a chest of gold buried six feet underground, but the riches we seek today in this lair are more valuable than the wealth sought by greedy mortals."

Sonia nodded. Tanaka's words instilled a deep fascination within her, already fueled by his previous comments. They had sojourned to the dungeon, which Sonia knew as the mall frequented by their peers and children scrambling from their parents. In contrast with the muted neon colors splashed on the walls and the eclectic clothing in the windows of other stores, bricks were the foundation of their emporium. While the brightly lit interior was similar to neighboring shops, the closest clothing racks contained dark and eccentric shirts with familiar band names and innuendos.

"Spence's Novelties," Sonia murmured, her hands clasped in front of her sky blue blazer. She smoothed stray curls of blonde hair behind her ear and adjusted the feather in her matching cap. "I believe there are vendors from Novoselic who have worked with this establishment to promote their wares."

Tanaka peered down at her, tugging the fishnets clinging to his arms. "Is that so? Well, I know plenty of treasures are within the dungeon, so you may find fortune."

"Eh?" She blinked, turning her head. "But I had thought the mall was the dungeon, considering we had to find this store on the map kiosk."

Tanaka chuckled, his arms crossing over his chest. "Don't be fooled. We arrived here far too easily." He gestured at the shop, his many silver rings glinting under the fluorescent lights. "The real dungeon is clearly marked before us. Look closely. Do you see the twisting and tight aisles that seem natural in the dimness, or will you fall for the illusion, she-cat?"

She hummed and squinted where he pointed. Spence Novelties seemed quite cramped on second glance. Metal shelvings lined the entire span of the left wall. Black fabrics appeared to darken that side store, their color hardly reflecting the already faint light. And on the adjacent wall, with many unevenly placed racks filling the gap, were locked cases crammed with various accessories, trinkets, and, most shockingly, golden jewelry.

"While the clothes and gems strike us with curiosity, they serve as our present distractions. We must locate the vials promptly before you're eaten alive by this dungeon's deception," Tanaka remarked, clenching his fist in front of his face.

Sonia's brows furrowed. They had one purpose, a mission at Tanaka's behest. He had told her a solemn tale of mystical elixirs imbued with the essence of molten dragon fire. He required at least one to appease the Four Dark Devas of Destruction, for they had become fascinated with the bottle when Tanaka had visited Nanami, who kept one by her bed. Tanaka had claimed the hamsters were drawn to it, skittering around on Nanami's nightstand and unwilling to depart when Tanaka insisted it was time for their slumber.

"Then, we mustn't waste another second. I'm certain we'll overcome trickery and find the elixir," Sonia declared. She clenched her fists, her heels clicking as she pivoted in front of him. "We'll certainly provide your cute hamsters and yourself with its healing aura."

"Heh. An Overlord of Ice does not need pampering," he said, a hint of a smirk leaning into his cheek, "but regardless, it will be a proper addition to my castle."

He was referring to his dorm room, but Sonia did not bother to correct him. Together, they strode inside, their gazes quickly flitting throughout the store. Sonia's eyes lingered on the clothing wall, noticing several graphic t-shirts with crude jokes and band emblems. She recognized the bands, having studied their glam rock performances as a way to better converse with her peers. And discerning a few horror movie icons on many shirts, Sonia was tempted to request they pause their quest for her to inspect them when Tanaka sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"Ah, be wary. She-devils have impeded our search," he mumbled, his hamsters poking their heads out from his scarf.

Sonia gasped. She pulled herself to his back, asking, "Are they banshees?"

"See for yourself."

By tables of vinyl records stood Mioda and Saionji. Mioda quickly flipped through them, groaning. Her jaw rocked from side to side, matching the tempo of her tapping foot. Sonia worried she was filing down her molars, Mioda's grinding reminding her of electric drills.

But as they approached, Mioda stopped on a dime. She flashed them a bright smile, her cotton candy pink and blue braces on full display. She waved with both hands, eagerly greeting them, her bangles jostling over the repetitive drum beat pounding out of the speakers.

Saionji, dressed in her typical beige-pink and floral kimono, leered over her shoulder. "Oh, I thought I felt something creepy crawling up my spine, and it turned out to be him."

As Tanaka huffed under his breath, Sonia took the initiative. "Saionji-san, Mioda-san, good afternoon. Tanaka-san and I have come seeking a particular item."

She scoffed. "And you came in here dressed like that? You totally clash with everything."

Sonia blinked, taken aback by the shorter girl's critique. "I, er, believed what I was wearing was appropriate. I recognize this attire is better suited for my country, but I still believed it was proper here, too."

"Ha! That's not what I meant," Saionji jeered, "You can't possibly think businesswoman chic fits the mood, right? The prissy princess vibe doesn't work here."

Frowning, Sonia supposed Saionji had a point. Her attire did not exactly mesh well with the current atmosphere. Her cotton white dress with silver threads sewn into the hem was a far cry from the ripped jeans and ebony coats with plenty of bedazzled pockets for sale. The large shoulder pads extending off her steam-pressed blazer conflicted with the silk lingerie on the hangers directly behind her. But she insisted her hat was proper, pointing to a witch's cap made of a similar feathered material placed on top of a skimpily dressed mannequin's head.

Mioda puffed out a cackle. She gripped her hips, hugged by a pair of jean shorts. "Hey, Hiyoko-chan, are you the pot calling the kettle black? Because you're the one wearing a kimono to a rockin' grunge store."

"And as such, floral decals hardly conform to a place as mysterious as this," Tanaka added, narrowing his eyes. His thick eyeliner was prominent when he glared. "I'd suggest you pick battles that you can win."

Saionji's lip curled. She whipped her glare among them but did not dignify them with a response. Lifting her nose, she yanked a random record out from the pile. She turned it over in her hands, not bothering to acknowledge Sonia when she asked why they were in the store.

Mioda dug her multicolored nails into her temples, sighing. "I need my inspiration juices flowing 'cause I've hit a creative and lyrical bust. Hiyoko-chan suggested we look for new tunes together, but nothing piques my interest. It's all the same-" She jerked her body back, her wild, dyed hair flowing as she uttered a short screech. "-glam metal! If I have to listen to one more pop-inspired power ballad, I think I'm gonna scream 'til my lungs explode!"

Sonia pursed her lips. It sounded like Mioda was dealing with quite the conundrum. As Saionji snorted and tossed her record toward a clothing rack for a poor sales associate to collect, Sonia spared Tanaka a glance. His attention focused on the corner of the store, but Sonia didn't want to abandon Mioda in her time of melodic need.

"Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I just remembered! Have you listened to the latest EP from Zinc Spinster? Their songs are wonderfully heavy metal."

Saoinji whirled around on her geta. "Wait, what? That doesn't come out until next month."

"As they say, I'm totally serious, dude."

Mioda gawked, her arms shooting above her head. "No way! Did they bump up the release date? Did it slip under my radar?"

She shook her head. "My favorite occult radio station was promoting it yesterday. Early editions of the EP were sent out but aren't available yet. Perhaps if you ask an employee, they could place an order now, and you can obtain it when it's in stock." She paused, tapping her chin. "I believe the host reported that you can receive it as early as next week."

Mioda jumped in place, her shredded jacket slipping off her tattooed shoulders. "Heck yeah! You're the best, Sonia-chan! Thanks a bunch! I'll name my next underground hit after you! Keep your ears open for 'O Wise Queen of the Damned!'"

As Mioda scampered off to the front desk, Saoinji flashed a toothy grin. She calmly followed after her, remarking, "Heh. I guess a brain does go with your beauty."

Sonia hesitantly chuckled. "Um, thank you. I'm happy to have helped."

As their footsteps retreated to the front of the store, Sonia gave Tanaka her full attention. His expression remained placid, his eyes flitting between her and the distant corner. She apologized for the distraction, knowing they had arrived with a purpose to acquire what was needed for the Four Devas of Destruction.

He lowered his scarf. The corner of his lip had risen. "There is no need for such words. It was hardly a trifle when your generosity quelled the beasts before they roared," Tanaka said, "but let us make haste. I know we are close. I sense it."

A spark lit in her chest, warming her against the nippy interior. Sonia followed Tanaka as they searched the aisles, braving the chill of the multiple fans that rattled and blew from above. A variety of wallets, pendants and expensive brands filled the shelves. She reminded herself to investigate for Novoselic products after they

finished their quest, but as they almost rounded a confoundingly colorful corner, Sonia stopped dead in her tracks.

She grasped Tanaka's sleeve, carefully avoiding his bandaged hand. He stiffened. A grunt pressed against his closed lips. She pointed to a deep gray coat hung on a clothing rack, its buttons brass and trim reaching his shins in a dovetail. The polyester fabric was heavy, but when she pulled it toward her, she found it was satiny.

"Look! I think you would look very spiffy in this! Could this be the style of steampunk?" Sonia exclaimed, clasping her hands.

He hummed, his eyes widening. He gestured for the coat, and Sonia held it up to him. It was a perfect fit, the style suiting his darker ensemble. San-D poked his head out from Tanaka's sleeve and nuzzled against the pinned cuff. The other hamsters appeared, chittering to Tanaka, who nodded and folded the coat over his arm.

"You are keen, she-cat, for, in my haste, I failed to notice this distinctive garb," he mused. He chuckled as the hamsters curiously tugged on the closet button, squeaking. "Yes, it is an exceptional cloak worthy of my purchase."

Sonia smiled. "You're very welcome. Now, shall we proceed together?"

He smirked. "We shall."

Together, they entered their destined aisle. Sonia's shoulders hitched. Even Tanaka drew in a slow breath.

On every shelf was a lava lamp of a different hue. Teal, vermillion, emerald, and even hot pink liquids ebbed and flowed within their containers. The bulbous bubbles within rose and lowered at random. As they came closer, the lights illuminated their bodies like kaleidoscopes. Comfortable heat radiated from the lava lamps, prevailing over the persistent chill of the fans, leaving Sonia in a state of awe.

"To mortals, they deem these lava lamps. To me, they are molten dragon fire elixirs to soothe the Devas," Tanaka said, tracing his calloused fingers along the smooth curve of the closest cerulean lamp. He grasped it and held it to the hamsters lining up on his other arm. "What do you think? Does this subdue your ire?"

They chirped and squeaked. Cham-P even gently nudged it with his head. With their approval given, Tanaka cackled. He thrust the lava lamp high above his head, proclaiming their quest as a success.

Sonia cheered, rocking on her heels. Her smile stretched on her cheeks, and she ignored the slight ache. It was worth seeing the joy spreading across Tanaka's expression.

They shared in mutual excitement, surrounded by colors and warmth. Sonia cupped the top of the lava lamp still in his hands. Heat seeped through her skin. It was like tangible sunlight, or as Tanaka insisted, it was molten dragon fire, uncontaminated by human hands.

But the Devas started fussing. They stared at her, bobbing their heads toward her blazer. She looked down, but the lava lamp caught her eye instead. She glanced between it and her outfit, befuddled while they whined, Jum-P going as far as to cross his arms.

She blinked, a rush of recognition filling her. "Oh, the vial's color matches my blazer."

Tanaka paused, but he quickly cleared his throat. "Ah, so it - so it seems that is true. They must have an affinity toward the pigment."

The Devas wheezed out what sounded like snickers. They returned to Tanaka's scarf, snuggling inside as he cradled the lava lamp to his chest. He glanced back at her, his complexion somewhat darker than before, and she felt an even hotter aura lifting from his skin.

"Thank you for your assistance. Should you wish to explore the rest of this dungeon, I will accompany you," Tanaka offered.

But she shook her head. "Actually, as enjoyable as it would be to look for items from my home country, I'd only like one thing."

"And that is?"

She selected a lava lamp with violet liquid swirling inside. Smaller bubbles filtered toward the top. "This one reminds me of your scarf," she said, and she hugged it to her neck, sighing at its warmth. "I think the proper term used by our peers is that these items are 'vintage,' yes?"

Tanaka's cheeks flushed. He quickly raised his scarf, avoiding her gaze. The Devas reappeared, looking up to Tanaka with an emotion Sonia could not place. When Maga-Z mimed a chuckle, Tanaka gently ushered them back into the folds of his scarf.

"W-well, I suppose so," was his response, and Tanaka hurriedly made his way to the front of the store. "Now, let's hasten our exit before the dungeon devours us."

Sonia smiled, following him in tandem through the cluttered aisles toward the cashier stationed in the center of the store surrounded by clutter. They set their items on the counter, fishing for the wallets in their pockets.

But the young woman simply drummed her sharpened, scarlet nails on the glass. She examined their goods with critical, slate eyes. Her strawberry blonde hair was held by an oversized bow in a high ponytail, the rest flowing out behind her. Wearing a jaguar fur jacket, she leaned forward, her gaze suddenly lost in the depths of boredom.

"Um, hello. We're ready to make our purchases-" Sonia glanced at the woman's name tag. "-Enoshima-san."

Clicking her tongue, she said, "Ugh, God, don't remind me."

Tanaka tightened his grip on his wallet. "Well, are you going to perform your duties, vixen?"

With another tongue click, she said, "I shouldn't, shouldn't I? But I already worked so hard placing a pre-order for that loudmouth and her little banana-do friend." Her nose wrinkled, causing Sonia to notice the heavy white powder painted on her face. "Seriously, a girl does her best to piss off her customers and get canned, but everyone is too despairingly nice. For a goth shop, this place attracts people with the best hearts."

They were stunned into silence. Sonia and Tanaka glanced at each other. She tilted her head at Enoshima, whose smug expression fell into exhaustion. She gathered their items, ringing them up as she ranted.

"I should've taken that job with my lamebrain sister next door at Ancient Marine. Their clothes are trashy, but man, I would've caused so much chaos over there. I would've gotten such a kick out of knocking down ugly sweatshirt displays." Enoshima tapped a few keys on the cash register. "But woe is me! I'm stuck at this highway robbery dump of a business." She thrust her hand at them, her tone a chilling whisper. "Cough up the cash."

They did as they were told. Although Sonia's eyes bugged at the exorbitant price of Tanaka's coat, he didn't express concern. Instead, they paid, and Enoshima tossed excess bills their way. Sonia was ready to comment that Enoshima overpaid, but her wolfish grin implied the consequences should they prevent her firing.

"Have a super day," Enoshima called, "and don't forget Spence's Novelties is your favorite store for overpriced crap!"

They exited to the sound of a manager barking at the giggling Enoshima. Sonia breathed in the notable fresher air and listened to the idle chatter of other mall-goers. She glanced down at the plastic bags between them, shaking off their encounter with the cashier.

She focused on Tanaka, who grinned at his hamsters. She was delighted to have embraced the moment with her dearest friend. Warmth persisted on her skin, the shades of blue and violet meshing together in their shared bag. She was optimistic they'd set up the lava lamps on their nightstands just as Nanami had done, and every night, she'd think of Tanaka before she slumbered.

When she suggested they take a break in the food court to refuel from their quest, she smiled when he said yes. Linking their arms together, the Devas between Tanaka and Sonia on her shoulder pads, Sonia looked forward to their next dungeon adventure.

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BLADE LOCK

# Untitled

**by Lance (ecchi_skecchi)**

"Ugh! There's, like, nothing new to shop for!" Junko's displeasure was clear as she threw her hands up. It wasn't technically true; Mukuro knew that because she was the designated courier of all of Junko's purchases. Already she had a small bag from the video store, but they'd gone to five clothing stores and it seemed like her sister was getting fed up.

"Well, Junko, maybe we should wait a few more days before we come back next time," Mukuro tried to advise, but Junko just waved her hand dismissively.

"As if!" Junko rolled her eyes as she stormed out of the department store, forcing Mukuro to hurry after her. "There's always something to do at the mall! There can't be just... nothing!"

Mukuro bit back another comment as they walked out towards the food court area. She nearly bumped into her sister as she stopped. "What is that?" Junko marveled. There was a small platform with speakers set up in the middle of the food court. A curtained off area hid a "backstage", if one could call it that.

"I'm not quite sure."

Junko turned to her with a scowl. "It was rhetorical!" She plopped down in a chair, her eyes never leaving the stage. Mukuro knew to leave her alone in these moments. She would probably be analyzing every second of whatever was coming next.

They didn't have long to wait; a girl with dark blue hair and eyes wearing a frilly, pink idol outfit danced out onto stage. She grabbed the microphone and put up her hand in a fist. "Towa City Mall! How is everybody doing today?" There were some moderately loud cheers from the people who were gathered near the platform. "I'm so excited to be here again. My name is Sayaka Maizono, and I'm your mall idol!"

"Mall idol?" Mukuro questioned.

"Yeah. They've been popping up all over Japan. I didn't know Towa City would play host to one." Junko didn't turn her head from the performance.

"Now, here's my song: Monochrome Answer!" It was a peppy tune that even somebody as stoic as Mukuro could feel herself nodding along to. This Maizono girl was clearly a natural performer, drawing in the crowd and leading them along a path of fun and excitement. Her dancing was infectious, and several younger children tried to mimic her. She waved to them and posed for them, reaching out for them to grab her hand.

After a few songs, Sayaka waved to the crowd again. "Thank you! All of you are so wonderful, and I love you all!"

Junko stood and began walking towards the stage as Sayaka disappeared behind the curtain. Mukuro stood and followed, wondering just what Junko was up to.

*****

"That was amazing, Sayaka!" Makoto exclaimed as she came back into view. He had been clapping along behind the scenes. As her assistant and best friend, he came to all her events.

Sayaka rushed to hug him, squeezing him tight. "Thank you! I got out there and all the nerves faded away, just like you always say they will."

"I will never stop believing in you," Makoto replied, smiling. When they had started out, Sayaka had been really nervous, but it turned out she was a natural performer. It was like watching an eagle flying or a shark swimming; she seemed born to sing and entertain. They'd begun setting up stages in the open areas of malls in the Tokyo area, trying to entertain, and soon enough, mall operators like the Towa Corporation came calling to invite her to come sing in theirs.

Makoto was broken from his train of thought as somebody patted the curtain in between the small backstage area and the actual stage. The two broke apart. "Uh, come in?" Sayaka said tentatively.

A blonde girl with her hair in twin tails marched in, a bright smile already plastered across her face. A serious, black haired girl followed behind her. The two looked strikingly similar; they could have been identical twins if not for the differing hairstyles and colors. The blonde girl stuck her hand out to Sayaka. "Pleasure to meet ya! I'm Junko Enoshima."

"I'm Sayaka Maizono," she replied, a little taken aback but shaking her hand regardless. "Are you a fan?"

"I am now! You just have such a wonderful singing voice!"

Sayaka brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Usually I don't greet fans until later-"

"Well, you've never had a fan quite like me before."

Makoto mentally agreed; she had never had a fan this bold before. He met the other girl's eyes and the girl made a look that screamed 'Sorry, she's always like this'.

Junko let go of her hand and launched into a spiel. "You know, I've always wanted to be a mall idol, just like you."

"Really, Junko? I didn't-" The other girl tried to say but Junko whirled on her heels.

"Yes, Mukuro, I have. I was just telling you that, right?" she asked pointedly to the other girl.

Makoto noticed Mukuro recoil away a bit before replying, "Y-Yes, of course, Junko."

Junko spun back to Sayaka. "I've always wanted to be a mall idol. You seem like a really good one, so I was thinking; maybe we should have a little competition and see who can do a better idol performance."

"Huh?" was all Sayaka could say.

"It would be a wonderful way for you to show your skills off, unless you're afraid."

Makoto instantly knew Sayaka was hooked with the way her eyes refocused and her face grew serious. "I'm not afraid at all. I accept your challenge, Junko Enoshima."

Junko's smile grew wider. "Excellent. Mukuro-" she snapped her fingers- "give her assistant our home phone number and we'll work out the details later tonight."

Mukuro scribbled out a note on a piece of paper, stepping closer to Makoto. "Sorry about my sister. She's very excitable and very blunt sometimes."

"Ehehe... It's no problem." Makoto laughed nervously as she handed him the piece of paper. "So I can just call you tonight at 6:00?"

Mukuro nodded. "That sounds good."

"C'mon, slowpoke! We have to start preparing!" Junko was already past the curtain. Mukuro waved an awkward goodbye before fleeing after her.

Makoto waited for the curtain to stop moving before he turned to Sayaka. "What was that whirlwind?"

Sayaka looked determined. "It was just like she said; a fan, challenging an idol to step her game up." She clapped her hands together. "I am going to step my game up. Let's show everybody just how talented this idol can be!"

*****

"Mukuro!" Junko called from the other side of the house. "Have you seen my bedazzled dress? I want to make sure all eyes are on me in that performance!"

Mukuro was sitting next to the telephone waiting. "No, have you checked the back of the closet? It may have fallen down."

"Don't you think I would have checked there first?" Junko snapped back.

Mukuro tapped her finger on the phone, praying that the boy from earlier would just call her. Just like that, her prayers were answered as the phone started ringing. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this the girl I talked to earlier?" A boy's voice came through the transceiver.

"Yes, this is Mukuro."

"Great!" Makoto chuckled nervously. "So, I was thinking that we should have each idol sing three songs, with their best performance winning."

"How do we determine that?"

"Maybe some judges?"

Mukuro thought for a moment. While Sayaka had seemed to entrance her crowd, she believed Junko could do the same thing if she tried. "No, I think it would be better to do audience applause."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"What about staging?"

"I think that they can both use the same stage; that would be fair, right?"

Mukuro tapped her chin. "Yeah, that would be fair."

Makoto continued. "The mall reached out. They said that they would love to do something like this. They want to do it in a week; next Saturday at three o'clock."

Mukuro looked back and forth in surprise. That gave them only six days of practice. "Saturday?"

"Yep! We'll see you then!" He had misinterpreted her question as confirmation.

"Wait-" Mukuro lunged, as if it could make him hang up less fast but it was too late; all she could hear was a dial tone.

Junko strutted into the room, wearing a bedazzled sweatshirt. "I couldn't find my dress so I took this out of your closet."

"That's fine..." Mukuro slumped over. Six days was not a lot of time.

"Did that nerd call you yet? What are the deets?" Junko blew a bubble with her gum and popped it loudly.

Mukuro explained what Makoto had told her. At the end, Junko swung herself around so she could put her hands on Mukuro's shoulders and look into her eyes. "We've got a lot of practicing to do, so let's not waste any time!"

*****

The next six days were filled with trials and tribulation. After school every day, Mukuro would drag Junko to the gymnasium to work on dancing and singing. Junko was a quick learner, and with daily work she was able to get in the rhythm. Nights were spent combing and re-combing through every article of clothing that the two owned, Junko using her sharp eye to create the perfect outfits for a stage.

Even so, those days didn't feel long enough. There were never enough moments for an extra rendition of a dance or another readthrough of the lyrics. Junko worked hard, but from a standpoint from the military-minded Mukuro, no training could be enough, especially when they were competing with an actual mall idol.

However, time marches inevitably forward, and that Saturday the two walked into the mall, Mukuro carrying the bags and Junko strutting in front. They passed a sign that had "Idol Battle! Sayaka Maizono vs Junko Enoshima" splashed on the front. Similar signs were plastered all over the walls on the way in. "Guess the mall is really invested in this," Mukuro commented.

Junko stuck her tongue out. "No shock there! I'm super good looking and super talented, so of course they'd want to show this off."

"Of course, Junko." The two made their way through the first atrium and through the food court. Ahead, they could see the platform for the stage, bedecked in black drapes. Two spotlights sat on the floor pointed at the stage.

A huge man with a trainer's outfit walked over holding a clipboard. "Are you Enoshima?"

"Yep, that's me!" Junko did a twirl as she played with her hair.

The man smiled. "That's great. My name is Nidai, and I'm the manager for this event. We've set up a small dressing room for you." They followed as he walked behind the stage, where a curtain was guarded by a fierce-looking girl with brown hair and a calm silver-haired girl. "It's this right curtain. Pekoyama and Owari are here to make sure that nobody gets any funny ideas."

Mukuro looked skeptical, but Junko just smiled. "Sounds great!" She marched in and Mukuro sighed. The inside was relatively sparse: they'd left a table and a few bottles of water in the area.

"You'd think they could have sprung for better accommodations," Junko complained as Mukuro unzipped the bag and began laying out the different outfits.

"I agree, but it's not as if we can do anything about it." Mukuro held up the first outfit. "Let's get you changed."

*****

Makoto could hear the crowd murmuring from inside the dressing room. Sayaka paced the floor anxiously, her pink skirt fluttering out. "Are you ok, Sayaka?"

"Hmm?" She looked at him. "Yeah, I'm just nervous. That Junko girl seemed very confident. I'm a mall idol but I'm still new at this. She might be able to outdo me."

"I'm not too sure about that." Makoto scratched the back of his head. "I think you'll do really great. You're very talented and I can definitely see it. The fans love you."

"Sure, but is it enough?" Sayaka looked down. "What if I stumble? What if I forget a line? What if I fail and the fans leave me behind?"

Makoto walked over and took her hands in his, smiling warmly. "I promise that's not going to happen. You've practiced for this and that's what matters. Besides, even if something bad happens, your friends are here for you and I know I'll never stop being your assistant. No matter what."

Sayaka smiled back, blushing. "Thanks. I think I needed to hear that." She took a final deep breath. "I think it's time." She hurried over to the stairs leading to the stage as the two heard Nidai clear his throat.

Makoto gave a thumbs up and headed around the side so he could watch the stage. Nidai was already up there addressing the crowd. "We have two wonderful idols for you today! They're going to sing three songs for you, and afterwards your applause will determine the winner. That's right; you will be the judges here." The crowd cheered. He gestured to the curtains behind him. "Now, our first idol is somebody you guys may have already heard of. Give it up for Sayaka Maizono!"

The crowd cheered as Sayaka pranced out from behind the curtains, skipping over to the microphone and pulling it off the stand. She waved to the crowd. "How are we doing today?" There was a roar of approval. "Here's my first song! Monochrome Answer!"

She had decided to start with a known hit of hers, and as the first few notes were played, Makoto could see the crowd start to follow along. He also watched as Sayaka slipped into the rhythm. Sometimes she could be a bit clumsy in school, but on stage she became a whole other person. She was gifted with the talent to be a performer.

*****

Mukuro bit her lip in frustration as Sayaka finished her first song. She really was as talented as she had expected. Junko would need to harness a lot of charm to take her down.

The audience clapped as Sayaka went back to her dressing area and Nidai took to the stage. "And up next, we have a challenger. A first time idol, please give a warm welcome to Junko Enoshima!"

Mukuro clapped along with the audience as Junko strolled onto the stage, her heels clicking as she went and snatched up the microphone. She'd dressed in a leather vest and a jean skirt. "Let's get it rocking, Towa City! One, two, one, two, three, four!" A guitar riff sounded and a rock song started playing. She started belting out the lyrics, and Mukuro watched as she skillfully danced in her high heels. It was an unorthodox move from an idol, but it seemed to be playing really well to the crowd.

The move that they had worked on, which would be the coup de grace for this song, was when Junko knelt and sang directly to the fans in the front row. When the last chord hit, the crowd burst into cheers, and Mukuro smiled. Maybe this could work for them.

As Sayaka came back out in a school girl sailor outfit and started her second song, Sky Blue Canvas, Mukuro noticed Sayaka's assistant, Makoto, standing on the other side. She gave a small wave, and he waved for her to come over. She made her way around the audience to stand next to him. "Hey."

"Hi, Mukuro." His eyes didn't leave Sayaka, but his tone was warm. "That was a really good performance."

"Thanks. Sayaka is doing really well too." The two observed as Sayaka danced her way through the number at a fervent pace, then as Junko countered with a more peppy idol tune.

"It seems neck-and-neck so far." Makoto noted.

Mukuro bit her lip. "That means the next song is the make-or-break."

"Yeah. We wanted to write and compose a new original song, but with the mall scheduling it out so close we didn't have enough time to prepare." Makoto laughed sheepishly.

Mukuro's heart sank. She and Junko had been counting on her doing something new and original.

Sayaka came out onto the stage. She was wearing a red blazer over a white button up shirt. A silver ribbon was crossed neatly at her collar, and a white skirt completed the outfit. She stood at the microphone. Mukuro was already praying that she would say something other than what she suspected, but her hopes were easily brought crashing down. "You've been a great audience today. Here's my final song: I'm Not Typical."

"Crap."

"What?" Makoto turned to her. Mukuro just shook her head.

Sayaka began to dance, moving her hips in time with her claps, stepping from left to right, keeping the audience in the performance. Some of them even started dancing along, all the while Mukuro's stomach dropping further and further. Every turn, every stomp, every handwave; all of it was perfectly choreographed.

The song ended. Makoto clapped loudly but Mukuro stayed silent. Junko was definitely fuming backstage, and with the level of her rage, Mukuro didn't want to go check on her.

After a few moments of silence, Junko finally came out. Surprisingly, she had a wide grin on her face and her posture looked confident. She was back in her high heels, wearing the short bedazzled dress. "It's been a fantastic journey." She winked. "My final song for you all is..." She trailed off in anticipation. "I'm Not Typical." The first note that they had just heard started and Junko was dancing.

"You guys are doing it too?" Makoto said in astonishment.

"Yeah. We thought it would be a good, familiar song for the audience, and we were counting on you two coming up with a new song to surprise everybody with," Mukuro explained.

Things were actually doing well. The fans seemed to really like the new dance as a refreshing change. Junko

was nailing every pitch and tone, not missing a single beat. However, right as the second chorus started, disaster struck.

Junko had improvised a new dance, adding twists, fist pumps, and a jump or two. Mukuro had warned her against adding too much, pleading for her to wear more reasonable shoes, but Junko hadn't listened, and right as she spun, she stomped and one of her heels snapped. Mukuro watched in slow motion as her ankle snapped to the side and she fell.

"Junko!" Mukuro rushed forward, but Junko was already trying to push herself up. She barely missed a beat singing wise. As she tried to get up, Sayaka ran out from her dressing room, grabbing her and slinging Junko's arm over her shoulder. She slowly began to move, and Mukuro realized that she was helping Junko finish her dance, moving, turning when she needed to, smiling the whole way through.

Finally, the song ended and the tune faded out, leaving the two idols on stage, both breathing hard. Nidai came up on stage and took the microphone from Junko. "Alright, let's hear it for both of our amazing performers." The crowd responded with shouts of support, clapping, and cheering. "Alright, so we have this crown for the winner of the contest." He produced a silver tiara. "The way we're going to do this is by applause. So go ahead and clap if you thought Sayaka Maizono is the winner-"

"Hold on!" Sayaka shouted. Nidai looked surprised, but he put the microphone closer to her. "It doesn't really feel fair to compare our performances." She gestured to Junko's leg. "Enoshima was doing really well until she had that accident. I think she had a really good chance of winning."

"So what should we do then?" Nidai boomed.

Sayaka took the tiara from him and quickly and easily snapped it in half, the plastic breaking easily. She put one half on her head and handed the other to Junko. "We're both winners today. We came out and tried our best and that's the most that an idol can ever ask of herself."

Junko looked stunned as she turned the tiara over in her hands. She gently placed it in her hair. "Thank you, Maizono. You did really amazing too."

The audience burst into cheers as the two did their best to bow. Sayaka looked at Makoto and winked and he hurried over to the stage, Mukuro following him. He had gone to the soundboard and was flipping switches.

"May I have this duet?" Sayaka asked Junko as I'm Not Typical started again. Junko nodded and the two began to sing into the microphone, harmonizing and showing off just who idols could be.

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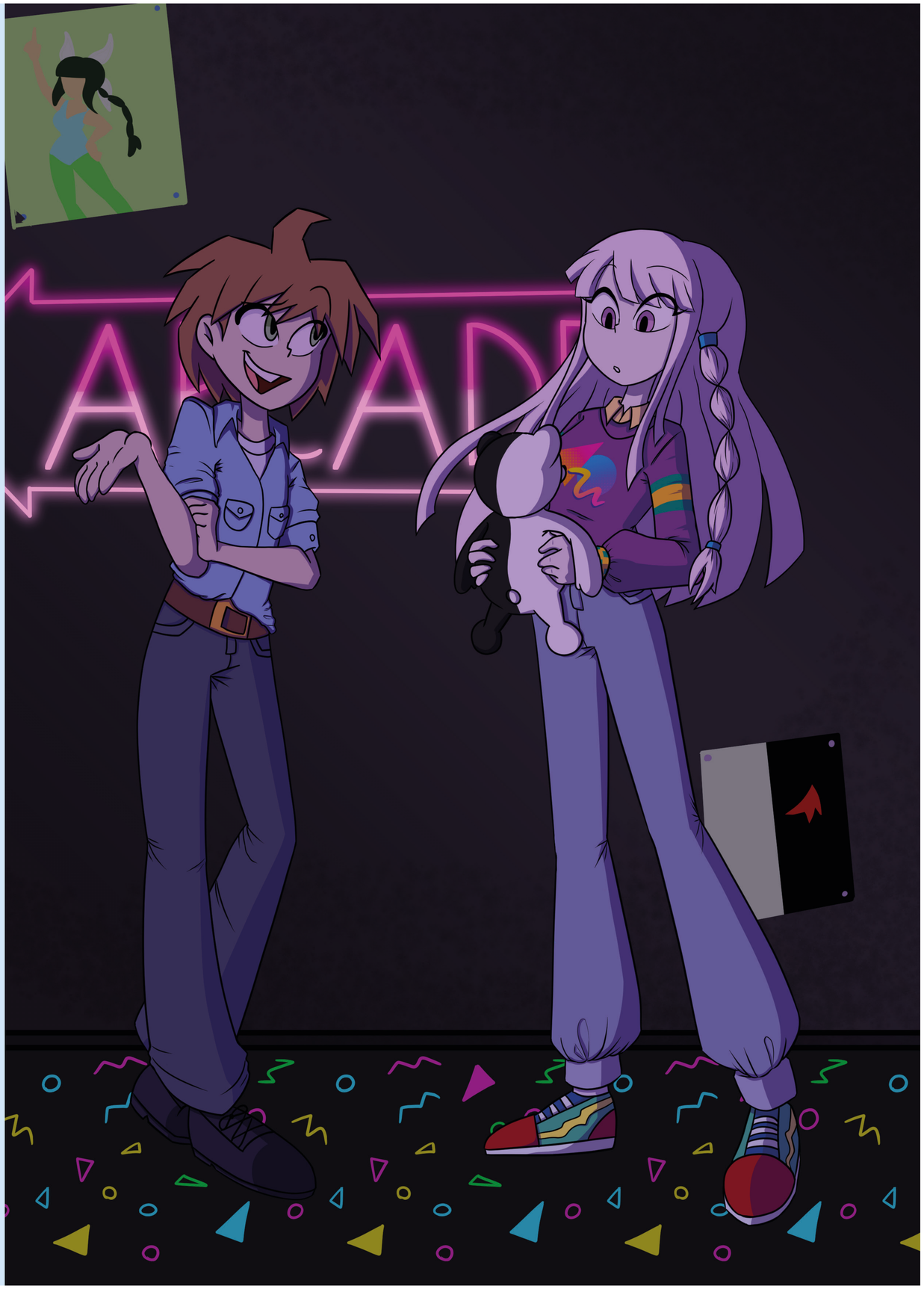


# Great Pretender

**by Winter (winterflakes )**

His fingers skim over the spines on the shelves in search of that one book he's been itching to read. Usually, the bookstore he frequents has the latest editions to his favourite mystery series so there wasn't a need to go over to other bookstores until now. Recently though, the series has been skyrocketing since a movie director took an interest and made a movie out of it. It translates to eager fans getting their hands on the new editions as earliest as the day of their release to the local bookstores.

The sudden popularity is a massive boon to the series' success and would likely lead to more books in the making. Regardless of how happy he is, Shuichi does feel a bit bitter about the unjust treatment. He has been following this series since the first edition, the author merely a novice at the time. For every new release, he was the first to buy them while everyone raved about the popular, illicit novels that were telenovela-worthy. He is one of the first among the many fans who knew firsthand of the struggles their favourite young author went through in their journey to make a series worthy to stand beside famous names like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven or Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express. So, to suddenly find himself beaten by a gaggle of newcomers is a bit…demeaning, in a way.

That, or Shuichi is being dramatic. Aftereffects of dealing with a certain clown dictator on the daily it would seem.

He continues to peruse the shelves, meticulously combing his way through each line of ochre wood. He looks like he's haunting the Mystery section, with the way he possessively scours through the books and scaring other book lovers from entering this part of the book cafe. No matter, he can deal with the grunt of the embarrassment after he finds his book.

And find them, he did. At the topmost of the remaining shelves is where his book lays waiting for him. With greedy hands, he quickly took it off the shelves and did a small victory dance – moving his hips and legs from side to side and clutching the newly acquired book against his chest. Shuichi smiles so hard that it stretches the skin on his face thin, unused to such a big gesture.

He turns and –

"Boo!"

"AHHHH!" He drops the book on the floor, pressed against the shelves and clinging for dear life, which wasn't a good idea when a jolt of pain courses through him from the impact. Shuichi breathes heavily, calming down and stares at the cackling menace in front of him.

"Nishishi, oh wow!" Ouma 'supreme leader, clown child, hazard to society' Kokichi wheezes out, shaky on his legs from how colossal his laughter is that it burdens his petite body. "Didn't know Shumai can move like that – or scream like that! It's pretty cute, haha!"

His eye twitches, blood roaring as it fills up his cheeks with an embarrassing colour that resembles a firetruck, "...What are you doing here, Ouma-kun?"

Yes, what is this self-proclaimed supreme leader doing here, at Hope's Peak Valley mall on a Saturday afternoon, anyway? Last time he checked, Ouma rejected his offer to hang out in the mall point-blank and refused to tell him why, citing himself busy on the weekends for some reason. Suspicious, like everything else about this man.

From how the other dressed in a uniform resembling a straitjacket every day for school to how he dressed himself today – a purple tracksuit that's been pushed upwards, teasing a sliver of his toned(?) midriff and checker sweatpants. Shuichi looks down and sees the other's worn sneakers and anklets before he comes back up. He lingers on his neck. The checker scarf Ouma is fond of wearing around his neck is noticeably absent.

Again, suspicious.

Aside from the few missing or obscured things at the moment, like his hands being held behind his back, he looks too... simple, almost normal. Yet, the whole outfit screams Ouma Kokichi. It wasn't often he sees someone as flamboyant and outgoing as Ouma to wear something like that but here he is. It practically sets off the alarm bells in his head. Cogs turning with questions inside his head. He must have been obvious with his staring if Ouma starts to smile like that, all nonchalant and sweet and very dubious.

"Wha'cha thinking so hard there, detective Shumai?"

"Ah, I'm just trying to figure out why you're here when you said you're gonna be busy all weekend."

"I am busy."

"Doesn't look like you're busy." Especially if he has the time to sneak up on Shuichi like this, he grumbles quietly.

"Are you calling me a liar, Shuichi?" The other bats his eyelashes – that's longer and more colourful than usual?? what??? – innocent and coy when he's anything but, "I wasn't lying when I said I'm busy, honest truth!"

"Yeah? Then why are you here?" He circles back to the lingering question. "If you're so busy that you couldn't come with me here, that is."

"Awww, are you still salty I broke this silly tradition of ours, my beloved?" Ouma snickers, "Well, don't be! I'm here now, nishishi!"

Shuichi flinches and sniffs, "It's not silly."

"Yes, yes, whatever you say, Shumai."

A scowl overtook him at the dismissal. Deciding it wasn't worth his time or mental health trying to figure out the other man, Shuichi ignores him and leans down. He picks up his precious book from the plush carpet to bring it over to the counter up front. Ouma follows close behind him, chattering his ears away with his usual jargon.

"Oh, and by the way," the leader cuts himself off while they walk out of the book cafe. A beatific grin graces his face that sends shivers down his spine. His gut feels like it's free falling into a bottomless pit. "I'm hiding from the cops because I stole something! And since he's here, that means Shumai's my hiding spot and accomplice! Yay, isn't this exciting!?"

"YOU WHAT?!"

— — — — — — — — — — — — — — — —

"I can't believe you, shoplifting in the middle of the day."

"What? You rather I do it at night? Did it, done it. Booooooooring!! Plus, it was too easy for an awesome supreme leader like me. So, one day I thought, 'Hey! Why not do this in the morning? With all the crowd and cops and whatnot. That'll be more fun and less boring!' so I did and here we are."

"There are several offences to what you just said- Why would you- Are you- Oh forget it!" Shuichi huffs, "Just- Would it kill you to tell me which store you stole from? What did you take from there anyway?" Maybe if Ouma tells him what he stole, he could take a guess and find the store. It's better than going blindly from one store to another.

"Hmm, lemme think..." Ouma puts on a thinking face, closing his eyes in concentration and it feels like Shuichi's about to snap the longer the other man drags this out.

"Nope!"

"No? As in, 'No, I won't tell you anything' or 'No, it won't kill me'?"

"Nope, as in I don't remember! C'mon, Shuichi!! A benevolent leader such as yours truly is far too busy to remember boring stuff like that. It's an insult, child's play! How could you even suggest such a thing!!"

"Child's play, he says..." Shuichi's mind turns to static. He buries his face in his palms to quell down the noises he makes. It's just as he feared. While he doubts the other forgot, Ouma would never let a simple task like this be solved that easily. It just isn't in his nature. Rather, he's willing to risk Shuichi's blood pressure spiking until he collapses on the spot. It is situations like this that test his restraints where he is most thankful he self-practices in some level of patience (has to if he wants to be a detective) because if it were anyone else, Ouma won't be leaving this mall unscathed.

What Shuichi would do, would've done to this little terrible terror if he's anything like Momota. Or worse, Harukawa. It could've become his debut as a Homicide Detective, except he's the one doing the killing after letting his temper get the best of him and landing himself on death row. God, if his uncle sees him now, that man would've personally brought him back from the dead just so he can wring his neck and kill him again. He can hear his voice now, berating him for the sloppy work at hiding his tracks and getting himself caught.

Ugh, nightmares.

He casts a withering glare at the jester beside him, still trying to prove his point as if he didn't nearly cause Shuichi to keel over right there and then. He's absolutely tempted to leave the leader to himself, with how much he loves to listen to his own voice.

He sighs. Tired as he is, he knows himself too well – if he leaves now, the problem will end up bothering him more than it has the right to. And that's not something he is willing to risk his reading time for. That said, he sucks it up and continues to drag the other around each store in the mall. He's counting on Ouma getting bored in the first few minutes. He's positive the other would tire himself hoarse and fess up the place he stole from. His pride, evening and mental stability depend on it!

Thirty minutes later, Shuichi gives up hope.

He's slumped over his spot on the bench. It feels like he just came back from seeing a quack doctor and got half of his soul sucked out of him as payment. Which isn't that far off. The person he's hanging out with is an

absolute quack. A quack sitting beside him on the bench, shamelessly enjoying the three scoops of ice cream that he haggled Shuichi to buy.

He sniffs, surrendering to his fate. He lets his mind wander as he listens to the soft piano playing in the background.

Not only does he have the misfortune of hanging out with a man as mad as the Hatter from Alice in Wonderland, Ouma just had to be a mooch on top of it. It's pure madness that he considers him one of the closest people Shuichi has. Although...

The piano suddenly gets cut off mid-song, startling him from continuing that train of thought. Sitting upright, he looks around the central plaza. The people that muse around and about continue to move along the flow of the busy afternoon, unbeknownst to the sudden cutoff. Shuichi raises an eyebrow, curious before he turns to address his friend.

It is not strange to hear a song getting cut off, it happens. But the long pause makes him hesitant to believe the simple conclusion he ends up with. From the way, the others around him are starting to look around in confusion, Shuichi isn't the only one who thinks that.

"...What's going on?"

"Mmm, prolly technical problems? Y'know how that goes." Ouma chirps, finishing off his cone as he stands beside him.

"True, but this seems intentional..."

"Ehhh." he didn't comment more on that when someone comes up to the middle of the plaza, looking as confused as everyone else. Though, it didn't deter them in the slightest from being in the spotlight, with the way people avoid the centre like a plague, hiding under the floors and beams overcasting shadows. Shuichi thinks it's weird but bold of them to stand out and thinks nothing more of it.

At least that's what he tells himself, if not for the person's next move.

As if on cue, the music suddenly comes back up, booming so loudly it startles everyone within the vicinity as the person suddenly moves along the music, tapping their feet and moving their limbs in a coordinated manner that corresponds with the music playing in the background. Then, more and more people slowly start to trickle away from the hidden crowd and join them.

It's embarrassing how long it takes him to realise Shuichi is currently one of the lucky spectators to witness one of those new trends nowadays – a flashmob, if he recalls Akamatsu calling it during lunch at school a few days ago – coming to life right in front of him. And he gets why they are so popular.

It's spellbinding, how the dancers attract their attention so easily with the way they move their limbs, going one-two, one-two-three-four, moving to the rhythm in sync before splitting in between to give way for a few dancers to jump and cartwheels and bounds endless energy on the spot, smiling so widely that their joy is limitless and infectious.

Shuichi can't look away, he doesn't dare look away for fear of missing out. The crowds around the dancing people cheer and clap and sing their awe to the crew, just as transfixed to the scene as he is. He is so focused on the performance, Shuichi forgets who he is with and why he is still in the mall when he got what he came for, the loud music further muddling his brain into mush.

As life would have it, it didn't take him long to be reminded.

From the corners of his eyes, he sees his friend suddenly move, coming into view as he steps forward into his view, tracksuit off and tied around his waist, revealing the checker crop top he wears underneath, hair tied in a messy ponytail that's tied with the missing checker scarf, his neck covered with a band of black in place of the scarf from when Shuichi failed to notice before.

His jaw slackens even further when Ouma blends with the dancers, so seamlessly that it looks natural for him to mingle, with a grin so voracious, that it shows how pleased he is and how much he's having fun. He does a somersault to further prove it.

Shuichi realised a lot of things today – the mall is always packed full regardless of the day, the book cafe serves one of the best coffee he had, normal clothes look as good on Ouma as his usual clown core attires do. But none of them can top the awareness that comes with realising Ouma has been busy doing this. This amazing act, which took him days, weeks away from hanging out with him, comes to fruition when it ends with a standing ovation.

Shuichi now knows where he keeps getting those bruises and scrapes on his knees all this time.

The palm of his hands stings from how hard he claps them together but he never ceases his actions even as the group starts to dissipate. He watches them bow and disperse and integrate themselves back into the crowd, disappearing within the sea of people that are still clapping alongside him. It's only when Kokichi bounces his way back to his side – sweaty with a heaving chest but a smile so wide, he can't help but reciprocate – that Shuichi stops clapping.

"That was amazing, Ouma-kun!"

"Nishishi, were you amazed, Shumai? I know I'm amazing but it doesn't hurt to hear more!"

"No, really. You guys were incredible! I didn't know you could dance!"

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me, dearest Shumai." He says so cryptically, a creepy grin stretching over his face, "Besides, if I had told you, it would've ruined the surprise, and that's no fun!"

"Still!! You were amazing out there, Kokichi!" He didn't need to ask him if the days they spent apart were due to this – the way Ouma preens at the compliment proves it.

"But of course, I am! Why would I lie? Also, see? I told you! I wasn't lying to Shuichi when I told him I was busy! So, as an apology, I want him to treat me to the arcade and skate rink!"

"Haha, you still have some leftover energy from that? I thought you'd wanna go home by now."

"And what? Leave Shumai to read his boring book all day in peace? Absolutely not! Besides, I'm already being plenty nice. You would be grovelling on the ground and begging for forgiveness otherwise."

"Would you now?"

"I would so!!!"

Shuichi chortles, "Alright, fine. Let's go to the arcade after we return whatever that you stole. I haven't forgotten about that just because you went off to dance, Ouma-kun." He laughs again when the other whines, fondness blooming inside him as they start to walk over to the escalator.

"Awww, you're no fun! But about that, I just remembered something!"

"Why does it sound like something I won't like...?"

"Hehe. I lied! I didn't steal anything! Surprise!!"

"WHAT?" Screw these sappy feelings. He wants to drop this problematic child somewhere far away from him and leave him alone to go home. So all this while they've been wasting time going around the mall, painstakingly sacrificing Shuichi's pride just by associating with Ouma, it's all for nothing?? Unbelievable. Shuichi should've left him when he had the chance.

Shuichi merely swallows his wounded pride and irritation down and lets the other man pull him towards the arcade.

KO'S
BUKI-E A
BUGS
55
JABBERWIPES

KIBBLES
KIBBLES
KIBBLES
MA THEATER
NG SOON
MONOMI'S HOUSE
PLEASE ASK FOR ASSISTANCE WITH PUPPIES!
HUMA
KIBBLES
KUMA

Monodam ultra sales !
-10% !!!!
Gucci
-50%
MonoDonald
Gucci
Happy
Havoc

TATTOO

DIAMOND FINGERS
Ultimate Exisals Attack
1UP
HIGHSCORE
30170
PRINCESS RESCUE
TWILIGHT SYNDROME
Out of Order

# Kaito Momota: Mall Cop

**by Catgrump**

Kaito took a deep breath as he gazed over the railing of the fourth floor of the Galleria. He exhaled with a smile as he looked down at the bustling crowds going about their shopping. He inhaled the scents of the fried foods in the food court below and glided his palms across the railing before rolling up the sleeves of his uniform, sighing once again.

"Something on your mind, Momota?" Kaito looked over to see his partner, Shuichi, approaching him with a cup of coffee.

"I'm just happy to be here, Saihara," Kaito replied with a grin.

"You like opening patrol?" Shuichi asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I love my job!" He looked back down at the citizens he's sworn to protect, "I love knowing I can help people any day. You never know when you'll be someone's hero."

Shuichi took a sip of his coffee before replying, "I suppose so."

"Well, why are you a security guard, Saihara?"

He moved to stand next to Kaito, joining his gaze, "In all honesty?" Shuichi began, "I'm trying to become a detective."

Kaito grinned. He had no idea his partner had such ambitions, and was pretty impressed, "I hope you're ready to conquer any challenges that face you along the way!"

Shuichi chuckled back, "Trust me, Momota... I've been in security for a bit now–"

"You've only been at the Galleria for about 2 months–"

"But I worked at the Hope's Peak Shopping Center for almost 2 years," Shuichi couldn't help but smirk. He's used to being underestimated and still feels a sense of pride whenever he can catch someone like Kaito off-guard.

Kaito's jaw was hanging open, surprised, but he still had a smile on his face. He always saw potential in Shuichi, but never knew anything about what he was up to before he got hired at the Galleria. "That's great, sidekick!"

Shuichi smiled and rolled his eyes. He doesn't love the term of endearment Kaito's been using since Day One, but he doesn't want to make Kaito feel bad, so he's been rolling with it. He nudged Kaito in the arm playfully as he replied, "Come on then, Mr. Hero, we should get started on patrol."

---

Whenever Shuichi and Kaito share a shift together in the Galleria, Shuichi takes notes on just how dedicated to the job Kaito is. Kaito's able to keep a casual conversation while they walk the halls, but Kaito's head is always on a swivel. His eyes and ears seem to always be open, ready for seemingly anything, so it was no surprise that Kaito caught a glance at the first incident of the day before Shuichi did.

"Sidekick, look," Kaito elbowed Shuichi, stopping them in their tracks by the entrance to the food court.

"Hm?"

But before Shuichi could react, Kaito was making a beeline for a child sitting alone at one of the tables in the middle of the vast room. Shuichi followed behind, moving not quite as quickly as his partner, so he could take notes of the situation.

The kid was looking all over the food court with no real sense of purpose, but visibly shifted when they saw two men in uniforms approaching. Shuichi also noticed the kid had a backpack with them, sitting it up on the table next to them. "Hey, bud," Kaito squatted down to be at the kid's eye level, "Everything okay?"

Shuichi slowly stepped closer so as to not intimidate the child more, worried seeing two security guards randomly approach you might be scary to someone who appeared to be no older than seven or eight.

Kaito waited a few moments, but the child didn't respond. He kept trying to make eye contact, but the kid was avoiding his gaze. Shuichi watched Kaito tilt his head a bit in confusion as he tried again, "You alright? Is your mom or dad here?"

Shuichi's chest tightened. This didn't seem to be going well, for whatever reason. "Kaito," he said, "they might be scared."

He instantly took Shuichi's suggestion at face value, quietly telling the child, "Hey, my partner and I are here to help. What can we do for you?"

The kid managed to look at Kaito, and Shuichi could see the relief in Kaito's face and posture...but they still didn't speak. They kept turning their head toward the Panda Express stall, then back to Kaito. Both Kaito and Shuichi took notice, but Kaito was first to speak once again, "Are you hungry?" he asked the kid.

They nodded 'yes'-- the first clear communication since their initial approach. "Hey, that's no problem. I'll get you something and then we can figure out where your parent is, okay?"

"Kaito–"

Before Shuichi could finish his sentence, Kaito had already gotten up and was walking briskly toward the Panda Express. Shuichi watched in bewilderment as his partner paid no mind to anything else in his way, including a woman approaching the table they were stationed at, carrying a tray of food from the Panda Express Kaito was heading to. "Officer?" The woman asked, clear concern in her voice as she made her way closer, "Is everything alright?"

Shuichi cleared his throat before asking, "Hello, ma'am; is this your child?"

"Yes, officer," she replied, putting the food down on the table her child was seated at, "I'm sorry, his first language is Spanish and he's still learning English, so he might not have understood something; is he in trouble?"

Shuichi's shoulders sank in relief, and he smiled, "No, no, ma'am, he's completely fine. He was sitting alone, so my partner and I were just making sure he was alright. I'll be on my way and let you two enjoy your lunch."

The mother thanked Shuichi and he waved goodbye. He made his way toward the Panda Express and found Kaito at the pick-up spot, holding a container of food, about to turn around. Shuichi tapped Kaito on the shoulder and said, "I'll be taking that; thank you," as he grabbed the food out of his partner's hands.

"You gonna bring it over to the kid?" Kaito then had a sudden realization, "You left the kid??"

Shuichi clasped Kaito's shoulder and gently explained, "Kaito, the kid's mom was getting him Panda Express. I just met her."

It took a few seconds, but Kaito's face changed from confusion to joy, "Hey, that's great!"

"You need to relax before you rush into situations like that, Momota."

"Can you blame me?" Kaito asked as they walked and talked out of the food court, "If there's an emergency, there's no time to relax! You need to always be prepared to save the day. The kid easily could've been lost, sidekick!"

Shuichi sighed and looked down at the chicken and noodles in his hands, impulsively bought by his good-natured coworker, and couldn't help but smile– even just a bit. Kaito's heart's in the right place, he knows that. Shuichi just wishes Kaito would pause to let logic take control instead of wearing his heart on his sleeve.

A couple more hours of their shift flew by with ease. Kaito and Shuichi walked all the floors of the mall and kept their eyes on things, not noticing anything too suspicious or out of the ordinary. They canvased the entire Galleria and were making their way back to the front entrance when Kaito elbowed Shuichi once again. "Sidekick," he leaned in close to whisper, "Do you see what I see?"

Shuichi furrowed his brow and looked around the direction Kaito was looking, "No... what do you see?"

"Teenagers."

Shuichi sighed as he looked at the group of four teenagers dressed in eclectic, yet presumably fashionable clothing, sitting very close together on a bench by the mall's front door. Before Shuichi could even respond to Kaito, he started for them with his chest puffed out, saying "I'm gonna go check on them," with intense purpose.

"Momota–"

"Hey," Kaito began, "What are you kids up to?"

As the teenagers turned to the security guards with furrowed brows of their own, Shuichi took the chance to observe the scene. The teenagers looked high school age, and there weren't any visible shopping bags around them. Shuichi checked his watch, which read four-thirty PM.

A redheaded teenager with glasses started replying, "We're just–"

"Aren't you kids supposed to be in school right now?" Kaito asked. Shuichi knew the tone of voice well: suspicion.

A teenager with thick curly hair responded with a confused "No?"

"It's a Tuesday afternoon!" Kaito said back.

Shuichi timidly approached Kaito from behind and tapped his shoulder, "Momota, it's–"

"-- It's time for these kids to tell me what they're up to!"

"Look, Mister," a blonde teen asserted themself, "Did we do something? We're literally just sitting here–"

"That's just it," Kaito explained, his arms crossed over his chest, "You're just sitting here!"

"What's wrong with that?" The redhead asked.

"Did you purchase anything at the mall today?"

"No?" The curly-haired teen was still confused, as were the rest of their group, "Is it a crime to come to the mall to just hang out?"

"Uh, guys?" The last teen, one wearing a baseball cap, finally spoke, pointing their thumb over their shoulder out the door, "My mom's here..." they turned to Kaito, and avoiding eye contact, said, "She's gonna take us home now... uh... goodbye, Mister."

As the teens gathered their bags and headed out the door, they were whispering about how weird that encounter just was, and Shuichi put his hand on Kaito's shoulder once again. With sympathy, he asked "Kaito… what were you thinking?"

Kaito sighed and hung his head, "Yeah, sidekick... that was a mistake."

Shuichi didn't know what to say. Kaito continued, "I guess I was just looking to save the day instead of assuming the best in people. I wasn't fair to those kids," He sighed again and turned around, brushing away Shuichi's hand as he did so, "I'm gonna walk around alone for a little while. Radio if you need me."

"Kaito–"

Kaito didn't stop. He walked further into the mall, hands in his pants' pockets, dejected.

---

Tccchh. "Um... Momota?" tccchhh.

Kaito pressed the button on his uniform's communicator radio as he continued to drag his feet across the marble floors, "Momota here."

Tccchh. "Kaito, it's Shuichi, I–" the signal cut out momentarily, leaving static in place of Shuichi's words, "The elevator near the food court–"

Kaito perked up, his back straightening– Shuichi sounded distressed, "What about the elevator, sidekick?"

Tccchh. "I'm stuck; I don't know what to do–"

"I'm on my way!"

In an instant, Kaito started bounding toward the food court, knowing where the nearest payphone was so he could stop on his way. He put a quarter in and dialed the number for the mall's maintenance department, explaining the situation as soon as they picked up. By the time he made it to the elevator, there was a crowd of people waiting for the doors to open. "Folks, I just got word that this elevator is going to be down for repairs, please vacate the premises; thank you!" He controlled the crowd, making sure the maintenance team could access the elevator as quickly as possible.

He pushed the talk button on his radio again to talk to Shuichi, "Shuichi? You read me? How you holding up?"

The signal wasn't as bad any more now that Kaito was close by, "Uh," Shuichi nervously laughed on the other side, "Not great!"

"Hey, sidekick, you're alright," Kaito assured, "Reinforcements are on their way to get this thing fixed, okay? Let's calm down together. What's your favorite movie?"

"My favorite movie?"

"Yeah, sidekick! What's your favorite movie?"

"What?" Shuichi hesitated, "My favorite movie?"

"You heard me," Kaito replied with enthusiasm, "What's your favorite movie?"

"God," Shuichi took a breath, "Please don't think I'm a dork."

"Why would I think you're a dork?"

"Just promise you won't think I'm a dork."

"Okay," Kaito couldn't help but chuckle a bit as he slid his body down the elevator doors to sit on the floor to keep talking, "I promise I won't think you're a dork."

"It's Star Wars," Shuichi muttered into the radio.

"Sorry, what was that? Didn't catch it."

"Star Wars," Shuichi begrudgingly repeated himself.

"Oh I haven't seen it yet!" Kaito was genuinely excited, "It must be good if it's your favorite, right?"

"It's kind of silly," Shuichi chuckled, "But it's a lot of fun... and I really like the characters."

When Kaito was about to ask about them, he noticed an employee in coveralls approaching him with a toolbox, "Hey, sidekick, the maintenance team's here; you'll be out real soon."

"That was fast," Shuichi said, realizing his breathing had finally steadied, "Thank you."

"For what?" Kaito asked, getting himself up from the floor.

"For being the hero today."

Kaito smiled, pride and affection for his coworker– no, his friend– swelling in his chest. "Hey," Kaito said as he made room for the employee to work, "That's our job, right? The hero and sidekick always look out for each other, like you did when I stepped out of line this afternoon."

Shuichi exhaled a smile of his own, "This is gonna sound cheesy–"

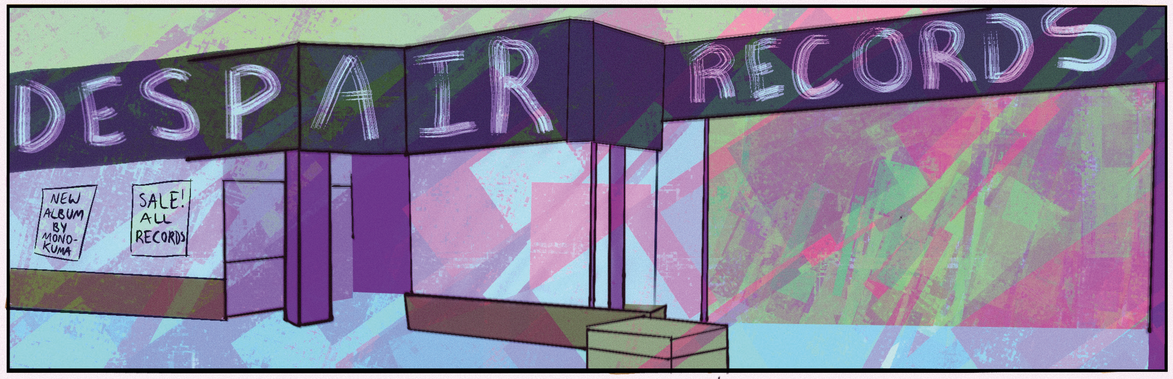
"I love cheese," Kaito quipped.

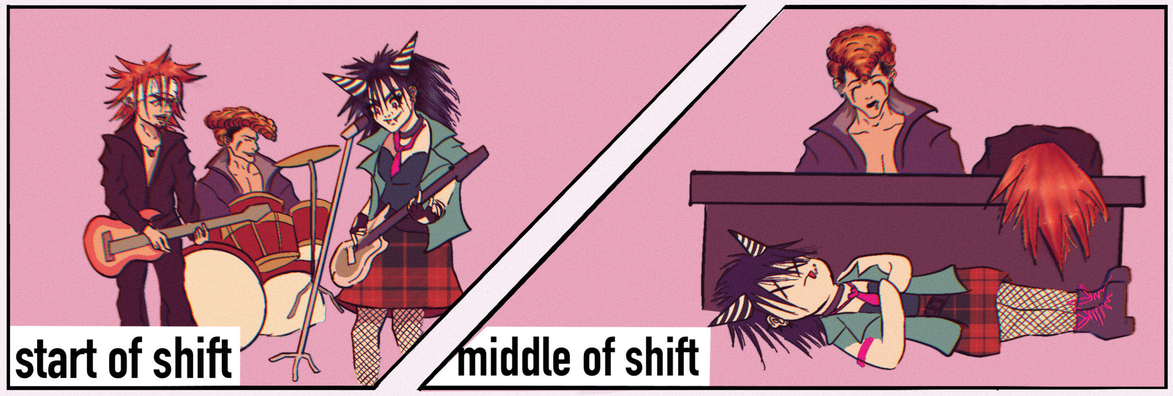
Shuichi laughed before replying, "Maybe we were each other's heroes today."

"Hey, I like that," Kaito was grinning now, "No longer hero and sidekick... two heroes side by side... protecting the Galleria–"

"And each other," Shuichi added.

"And each other," Kaito agreed, watching the maintenance employee make repairs, sitting in a food court chair, knowing full-well he'll be reunited with his co-hero in no time at all.


DESPAIR RECORDS
NEW ALBUM BY MONO-KUMA
SALE! ALL RECORDS


start of shift
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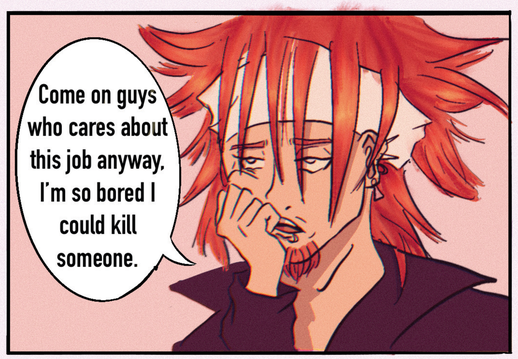
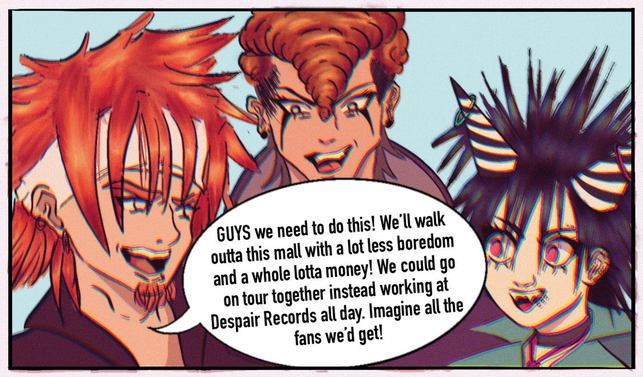
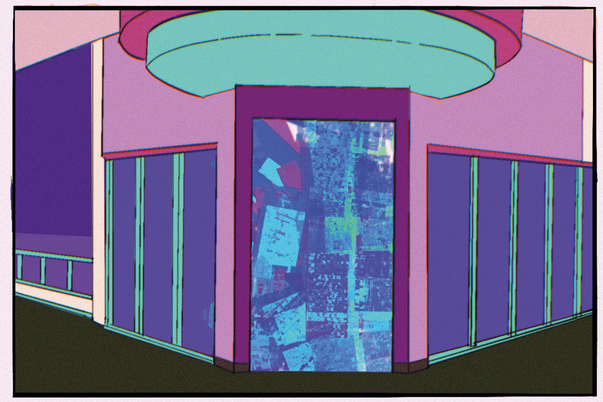
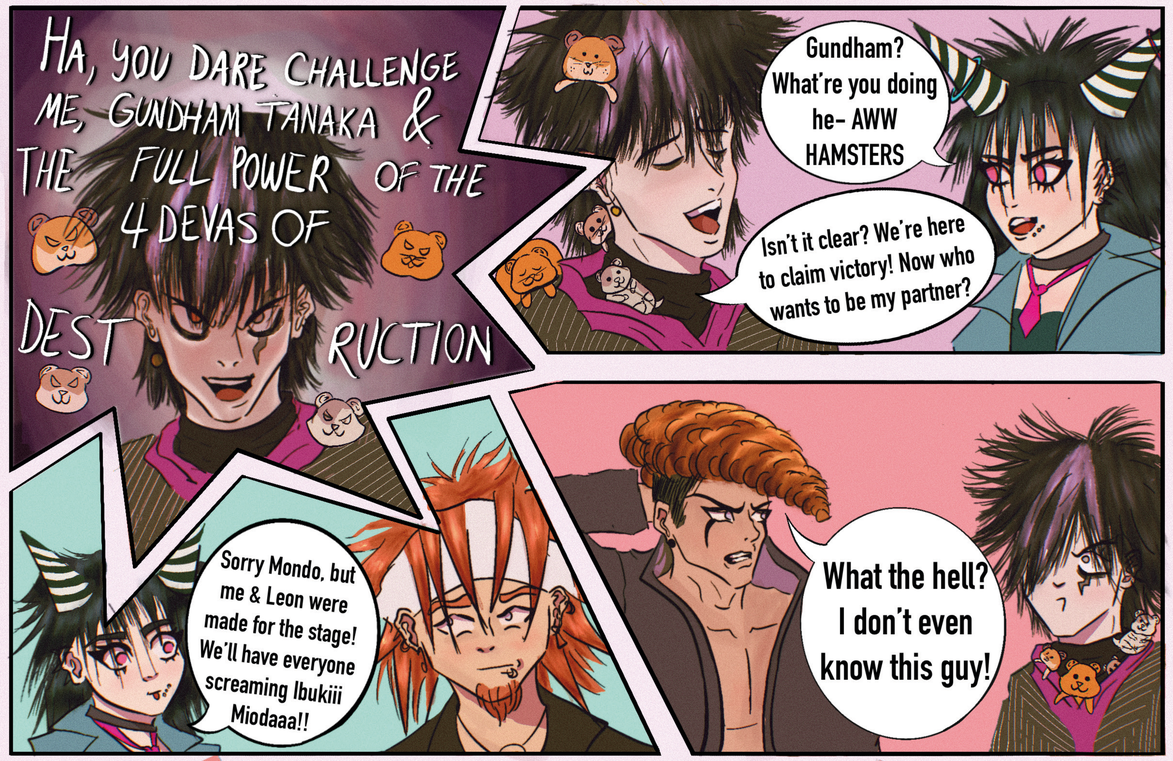

Come on guys who cares about this job anyway, I'm so bored I could kill someone.

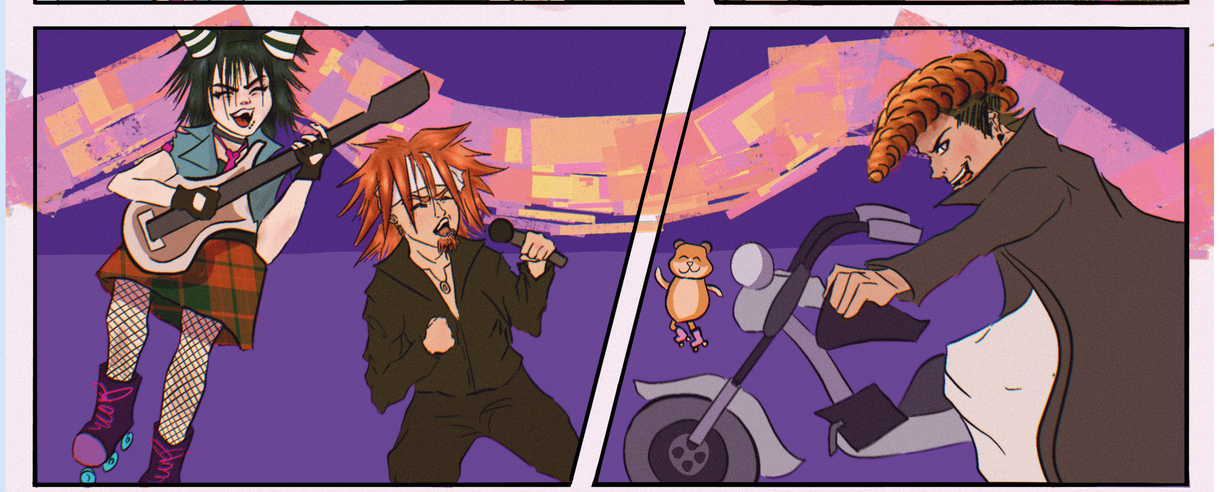
ATTENTION!!
MALL COMPETITION HAPPENING NOW!
HUGE CASH PRIZE!
TAKE 1
TAKE 1
TAKE 1
TAKE 1


GUYS we need to do this! We'll walk outta this mall with a lot less boredom and a whole lotta money! We could go on tour together instead working at Despair Records all day. Imagine all the fans we'd get!

"Welcome to the game! You'll face 3 challenges and the mall goer with the most wins gets a cash prize! First up,talent show on the roller rink, so hurry grab a partner!"




HA, YOU DARE CHALLENGE ME, GUNDHAM TANAKA & THE FULL POWER OF THE 4 DEVAS OF DEST RUCTION
Gundham? What're you doing he- AWW HAMSTERS
Isn't it clear? We're here to claim victory! Now who wants to be my partner?
Sorry Mondo, but me & Leon were made for the stage! We'll have everyone screaming Ibukiii Miodaaa!!
What the hell? I don't even know this guy!



Dude that's totally cheating! You can't just ride a motorcycle in a mall!?

You wanna throw down?! You're dead, I can bring my bike wherever the fuck I want. I'm a fucking Crazy Diamond!

Quiet or I shall release destruction in the form of hamsters upon you! The next challenge is...a race! It's everyone for themselves!

guys guys guys

Huh, this one says to meet at the food court to find the final challenger waiting for us?

hehe

Mwa-hahahahaha haha...

Your final challenge is a classic hotdog eating contest! Whoever finishes their plate first wins!

I, Gundham Tanaka wish to know the final champion!

Hehe, so that means Leon & Ibuki, you won the 1st despair. Mondo clearly prevailed in the 2nd, & Gundham has just defeated the hotdog despair. It seems a tiebreaker is in order...

I lied! Hehehe, there will be no tiebreakers since you all lost! The winners of my cash prize are the four dark devas of destruction! They defeated each of my despairs, I'm the mastermind of course!

# Distractions at the Mall

**by TheLilAlisa**

As Jataro steps into the mall, the light he has gotten used to flooding his eyes recedes, causing them to adjust. Rubbing his eyes, he is able to look around; with crowds of people surrounding him, the only things he can make out are above him. The second floor is much less crowded with people mostly inside a shop. The only thing that drew Jataro's attention was the roof made of tinted glass panes. Jataro stares back down at the paper in his hand, his list of supplies.

Scented instant watercolor markers, 50 pieces of chalk, good quality paper, and a pencil set, nothing more, nothing less. Jataro, determined to stay focused, get the supplies, and go home, began to walk towards the map. Distraction seemed to be Jataro's middle name, though, as he heard his name being yelled at from above less than three steps along.

Jataro looked towards the noise to see Masaru jumping to look over the railing and waving his hand like crazy. Then he crouched right in front of the glass the railing had in order to protect kids from falling and he ushered for Jataro to join him above.

As Jataro got to the top of the escalators, Masaru looked at him with a bashful smile. Masaru grabbed Jataro's arm as he begins to talk.

"Come on, we're going to the sports shop!" Masaru exclaimed.

"...Huh?" Jataro replied

"What do you mean huh, don't you remember what happened to my ball!?"

"That's right, your spiked shoes.... Do you think they could pierce skin like the ball?"

Masaru yanked Jataro as he said that, stopping them both in front of the store. Seeing a wall covered with soccer balls in the back, Masaru leads Jataro towards it. Once at the back, Masaru starts to look at and play with the soccer balls.

"Running quickly, I successfully pushed Kotoko out of the way, but oh no! The ball is still heading towards the goal. Stomp!" Masaru whispers, recounting the events leading up to his last ball breaking.

"If the ball went into the goal, you would have won." Jataro said as he grabbed a white ball with an asymmetrical black pattern off the shelf.

"No I wouldn't! That's not how the game works!"

"Look Masaru, it's like your ball, It reminds me of glass."

"Oh yeah it is!" Masaru grabbed the ball out of Jataro's hand. "... Why does it remind you of glass, is it the pattern?"

"Yeah, it's very different from the others, all the others are repairable while that one is like glass... once it's shattered you can never fix it, only buy a new one to take its place."

"..."

"But then the next one breaks, then the next and the next one until you can't remember why having glass there was important... your shoes must be like a hammer than, one step completely destroyed that ball forever."

"..."

"It was very cool to watch it pop! I wish I were closer... Huh?"

As Jataro said that, Masaru yanked his arm and pushed him out of the store, with his parting message being to leave him alone. Jataro was confused but did as he was told, turning around to face the rest of the mall. Just as he grabs out his list, he locks eyes with a bug display at a store downstairs. In his distracted state, he drops his list and rushes to the escalator.

Jataro looked around when entering, the only other person in the front of the store, a man with long green hair who stood at 6'6. After ensuring that the only bugs were in that section and he wouldn't be missing anything, he rushed towards all the resin-encased bugs on display. There was a mess right next to where Jataro was standing, someone had gotten too frightened of the bugs to pick them back up after dropping them. Gonta stepped out from behind his counter to go clean up. As he kneeled down to pick them up, he overhears Jataro's whispers.

"A Halyomorpha halys... a Lepisma saccharinum... a Scarabaeus sacer.. A Pierce Rapae."

Gonta's eyes glittered, "That's very good! That one is pronounced Pieris Rapae."

Jataro looked over not having noticed the man walk over.

"Gonta's name is Gonta!" he said, holding his hand out to Jataro.

"Are you an adult?" Jataro asked.

"No, Gonta is only 16."

"My name is Jataro." he said as he shook Gonta's hand.

Jataro looked back at the bugs and picked up the Pieris Rapae.

"Hmmm... this one is female," Jataro said

"Did you know female Pieris Rapae fly 0.7km a day" Gonta smiled.

"Wow! That would mean that they fly... 0.45km in their life."

"Yep! And the females fly in a linear pa-"

"Gonta! If you are done there, go back to the counter, there are some customers ready to check out," the manager yelled.

"Gonta is coming!" Gonta said as he got up, waved goodbye to Jataro, and rushed back to the counter.

Jataro did not stay long after Gonta left. He once again reached for his list but it wasn't there. Jataro's movements became frantic looking back into the store floor and beginning to rush back the way he came. As he rushes through the crowd, he bumps into a girl with long red hair who was standing s till, causing him to fall. She looks at him confused, as if she wasn't involved in his falling. Jataro feels a hand pulling him up from behind him.

"Why are you on the floor?" Kotoko asked as she brushed the dust off of him.

"...huh? Oh, that stupid adult pushed me." Jataro replied pointing towards where the red-haired girl was.

Kotoko looked, seeing no one, "Okay, what a mean adult! Let's go get candy to cheer up!"

Before receiving a reply, Kotoko started pulling Jataro against the movement of the crowd. Through the grays, blacks, and browns passing through Jataro's vision he sees Monaca, but only for a second– not able to register any details like the wheelchair she was suddenly in. Suddenly, the pulling stopped and Jataro bumped into Kotoko before noticing they were at the grocery store.

Neither one had ever been into this grocery store, so they began to go through every aisle in hopes to not miss the candy. As they walked through an aisle with tissues, paper towels, and toilet paper, Jataro picks up a green tissue box.

"No candy in this aisle, Jataro? What's with the tissue box? Does the filthy demon in your house need some?" Kotoko asked, a bit disgusted that Jataro would do something for his mother.

"No... They're for me, they taste sweet." Jataro smiled.

"Huh? Uh... Oh, for paper mache, you know it would be a lot easier to use glue or water to wet them."

Before Jataro could retort, Kotoko could be heard giggling from the next aisle. Jataro rushes to met up with her and pick up some sour gummies. She was barely visible with her enormous stack of candy.

"So much... Do you have the money for all that?" Jataro asked as he picked out his worms.

"Yeah! I have my dad's credit card!" Kotoko gleefully announced

"Did you steal it from him?"

"Nope! I walked in on him in bed, so now I'm allowed to spend as much as I want!"

Jataro thought about it before coming to the conclusion that if he were to walk into his mother's room at night, she would probably get a lock.

"You done?" Kotoko asked.

"Yes." Jataro replied.

"Awesome, let's go to the checkouts then! I'll pay for your stuff too!"

They rushed towards the self checkout, they didn't want to deal with filthy adults giving remarks on their choices or even attempting to talk with them. Kotoko drops her items on the side while Jataro stays holding onto his things. Kotoko attempts to start it, hitting the machine a bit hard.

"Oi! Be gentle with the machine!" the staff member watching over yelled at Kotoko.

Kotoko went still, her body shaking. Jataro walked up next to her and began to start up the machine and scan the items. He knew there wasn't much he could do for Kotoko after she got to the state she was in. One by one he scanned her items, leaving his items on the floor. As he got to the last items Kotoko knelt down, Jataro brought up his shoulders in case she began to scream and cry. But instead she stood and scanned his tissues and two packs of gummy bears, putting them into a separate bag.

"Don't forget, I said I would pay for these." she said, her voice devoid of emotions.

She got out her dad's card and completed the transaction, passing Jataro his bag of things before grabbing her own. As they walked out her legs were still trembling. They parted ways at the front of the store, with nothing more than a wave goodbye as she tried to hide her distraught face.

As Jataro looked away from Kotoko's direction he noticed a pet shop. He decided it was a good idea to get his mood up after that. Jataro walks in, completely ignoring the man at the front, heading towards the chirping. Colorful birds flew around the large cage, his eyes fixated on the green and blue budgies. As they move, Jataro's head moves. He was entranced by them. Unbeknownst to him the clerk had moved towards him and now stood behind him.

"... You seriously are entranced by them, their alluring spell was been successful... Too successful perhaps, you are unable to purchase any of these powerful creatures due to your age." Gundham announced.

"..." Jataro did not notice his presence or the words he had spoken.

"You fool! Do you know who you are ignoring, I am Gundham Tanaka! You will regret your ignorance one day for I am the dark lord who will one day rule this world."

Gundham continued to rant, releasing his dark devas of destruction from beneath his clothing, all the beck of Jataro's head. As Gundham continued, a blue-haired boy walked in, grabbed Jataro, and pulled him out, causing Jataro to snap back to reality.

"Yes, run away fools, just know that you will not be able to run away forever as I will rule the earth you stand upon," Gudham shouted before attending to the bird as it was time to feed them.

"Huh?" Jataro said, confused about that man's yells and why Nagisa was now dragging him.

Nagisa stopped next to some seats, pushing Jataro down into the seat. Giving him a paper, looking closer at it, the paper is Jataro's list he had lost earlier.

"Masaru gave it to me when I spoke to him near the entrance to the mall. You're not one to litter so I went searching for you. Why can't you stay in one place? I spoke to some clerk at an educational store who said he spoke to you, then I spoke to Monaca who said she saw you with Kotoko and when I tried to speak to Kotoko she began to cry." Nagisa spouted out.

"Someone said gentle to Kotoko, that's why she was crying," Jataro said, once again examining his list.

"I figured, no way you could make her that upset, she would have just called you gross if you got out of hand... I'm guessing you haven't gotten those things on your list yet."

"No, I got side tracked."

"Okay, let's go now, the crowds are starting to clear up so it won't take long to find an art store."

Jataro got up and began to walk alongside Nagisa, looking for an art shop. Nagisa made sure to look on both sides and to lightly tap Jataro on the head if he saw a store he knew Jataro would be interested in. After a couple of minutes of looking Nagisa spotted one and guided Jataro towards it. Once in the store, Jataro got out his list and read them to himself.

"Scented instant watercolor markers, 50 pieces of chalk, good paper, and a pencil set." Jataro whispered.

"Just so you know, I'm not going to check your stuff afterwards, if you forget something, that's your own fault."

Nagisa said.

"Mhm." Jataro nodded as he walked down the mini aisles

He began to grab things off the shelf, examining them and either putting them back or holding it in one of his arms, after 2 items Jataro put his list in his pocket in order to hold the other items. He took 15 minutes to look for all his items, backtracking and switching out brands. Afterwards he walked towards the counter, placing all the items there and grabbing out his wallet.

"May I please see you bag in order to know you aren't stealing?" the store clerk said

Jataro pulled the bag up to show her, reading her name tag, Angie.

"Here you go." Jataro said.

"Atua thanks you greatly!" Angie said as she passed the bag back and began to scan the items.

"Who is Atua?"

"He is my god! He allows me to create my art."

"... Like Kotoko?"

"Jataro are you done yet? I have my own things to get to," Nagisa said, walking up beside Jataro.

"$21.40 is your total."

Jataro grabbed out a 20 dollar bill and a 5 dollar bill, putting them in Angie's hand. He looked over as Nagisa while he waited for his change. Jataro had a hard time understanding Nagisa's expression and while trying to understand Angie gave him his change and another bag with his items. Nagisa grabs his hand and begins to walk towards the exit.

"That's all you needed, right?" Nagisa asked.

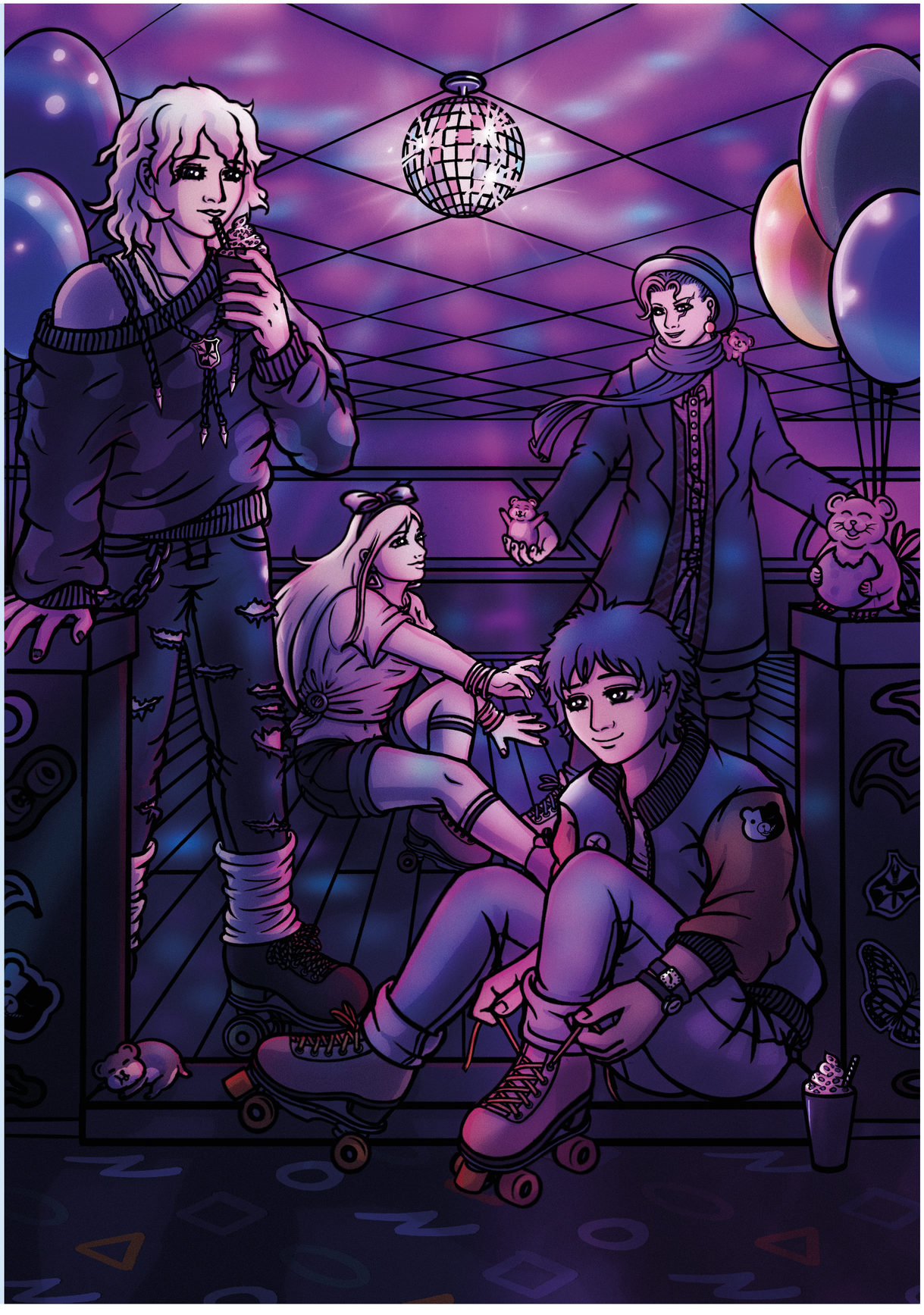
"Yes, that's all." Jataro replied.

"Okay, then here you go." Nagisa said as he stopped at the exit.

"Bye."

"Goodbye Jataro."

Jataro walks outside as Nagisa walks back into the mall. As Jataro begins to walk towards his house he decides to grab out his list once again, realizing that he had forgotten paper. Looking up towards the dark red sky he decides it's best to go back another day. A day with hopefully fewer distractions.



# THE END

## See Ya Next Time

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